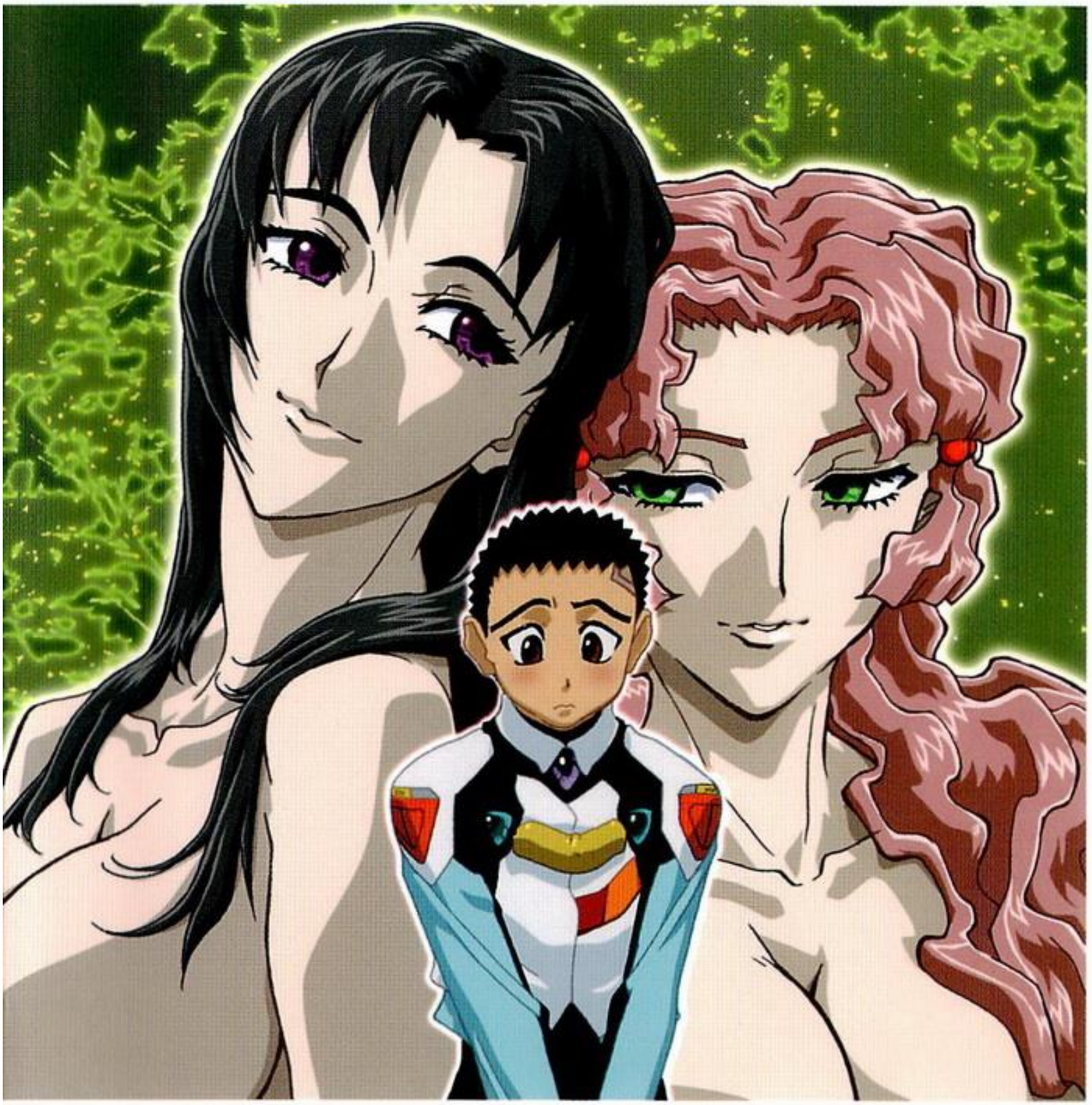
真・天地無用！魎皇鬼外伝

天地無用！GXP 7

梶島正樹



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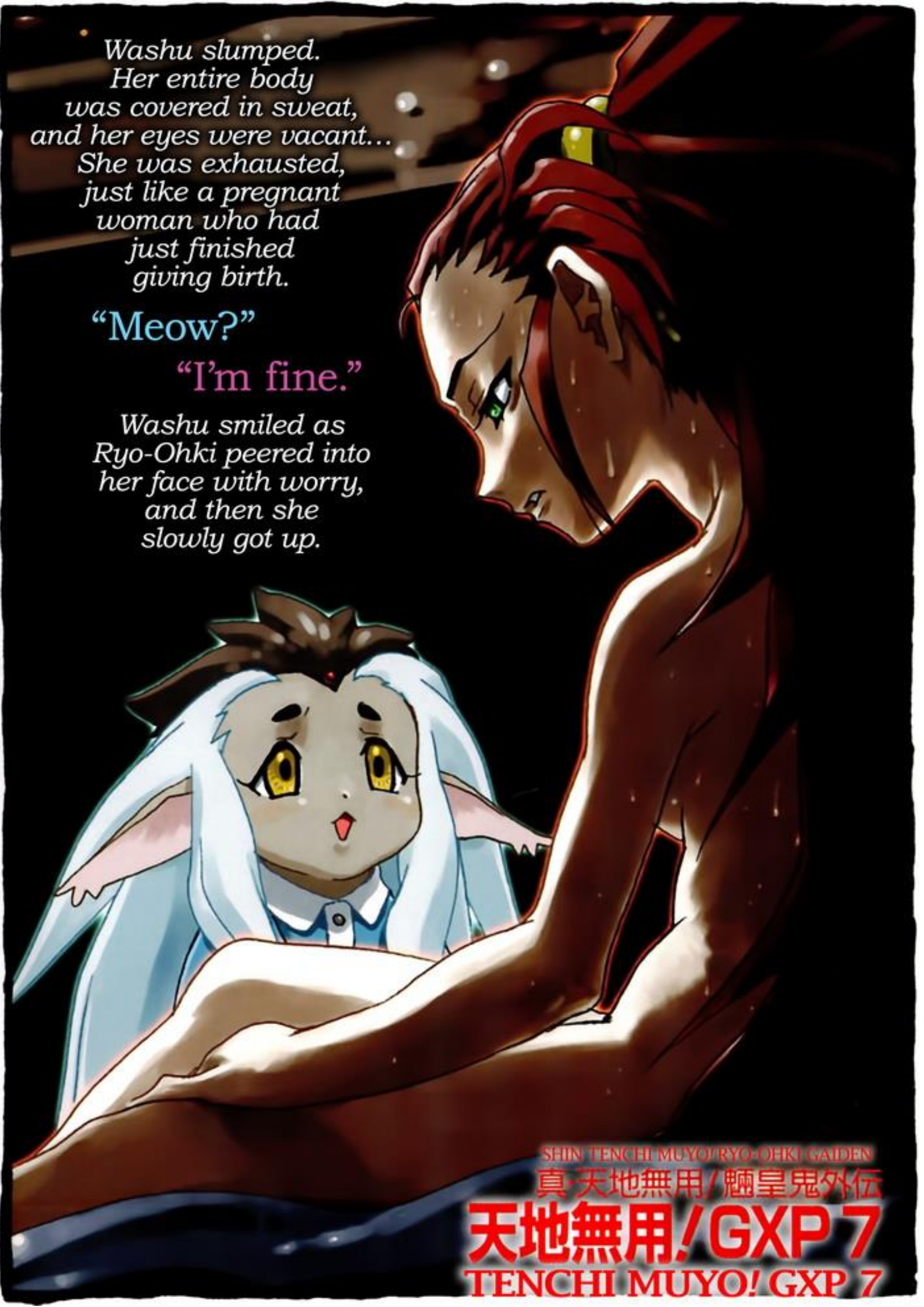
Washu slumped.
Her entire body
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and her eyes were vacant...
She was exhausted,
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"Meow?"
"I'm fine."
Washu smiled as
Ryo-Ohki peered into
her face with worry,
and then she
slowly got up.
SHIN TENCHI MUYO! RYO-OHKI GAIDEN
真・天地無用！魎皇鬼外伝
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TENCHI MUYO! GXP 7

"Danger!"

Hakuren and the others turned into a wall of flesh, killing Seina's momentum. In the end, it was Ringo who caught Seina before he crashed into the rocks.

"You've grown! You've grown so much...
"Your **height!**"
"Your **breasts!**"
Your **buttocks!**"
"**Ohh!** My precious great-grandchild."
As if overwhelmed with emotion, King Balta spread out his arms and ran towards Ryoko in order to hug her. Tears ran down his face as he rubbed his cheek against hers.

True Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Gaiden

Tenchi Muyo! GXP7

Masaki Kajishima

Table of Contents

Chapter One: My First Time Out	6
Chapter Two: Run away! Run away!	10
Chapter Three: Pan Dora	17
Chapter Four: To a New Battlefield	37
Chapter Five: Escape	52
Chapter Six: The Showdown	75
Chapter Seven: Each of Their Preliminary Battles	97
Chapter Eight: To Jurai	133
Chapter Nine: Duel!	161
Chapter Ten: The Lunch Show	187
Chapter Eleven: Production	201
Afterword	205
Afterword Theater Part 4	205

Illustrations

Cover - Minaho, Ringo, and Seina	Cover
Pinup 1 - Washu and Ryo-Ohki	2
Pinup 2 - Suiren, Karen, Seina, Ringo, Minaho, Hakuren, Gyokuren, Elma, Amane, and Kiriko	3
Pinup 3 - Balta King and Ryoko	4
Pinup 1 - Washu and Ryo-Ohki	6
Amane	14
Fat Alan, Barry, and Cohen	30
Kiriko and Amane fighting over Seina	58
Gazura and Kirche	74
Ringo and Airi	95
Gyokuren, Karen, Hakuren, Kiriko, Suiren, and Ryo-Ohki	104
Minaho, Azusa, and Funaho	131
Kuis-Tsukiko and Seina	149
Yuzaki and Seina	170
Neeju and Seina	185
Pinup 2 - Suiren, Karen, Seina, Ringo, Minaho, Hakuren, Gyokuren, Elma, Amane, and Kiriko	191
Pinup 3 - Balta King and Ryoko	198

Chapter One: My First Time Out

Earth. In the living room of the Masaki household, beneath the stairs, there was a peculiar door. It wasn't the typical storage space found in ordinary homes, utilizing the dead space under the stairs. If one opened that door normally, they would see a grid-like floorboard to prevent falls and stairs leading down into the basement. However, if one performed a certain ritual and opened that door, beyond it lay a hall so vast it defied physical possibility.

The door beneath the Masaki family stairs connected to the secret research facility of Hakubi Washu, located in a distant sector of space far from Earth. It consisted of three planets and a large station linking them. But Washu, who would normally be working in the central hall of the station, was nowhere to be seen.

"Myaa, myaa, myaa"

It was a space so pitch-black that its sheer size and shape were impossible to discern. The only gauge of its vastness was a faintly glowing, bridge-like structure about five meters wide and a hundred meters long, where a humanoid Ryo-Ohki stood. Yet the space, reflecting no light whatsoever, suggested an infinite expanse beyond.

"Myaa"

Washu slumped. Her entire body was covered in sweat, and her eyes were vacant... She was exhausted, just like a pregnant woman who had just finished giving birth.
"Meow?"
"I'm fine."
Washu smiled as Ryo-Ohki peered into her face with worry, and then she slowly got up.
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Looking up, Ryo-Ohki saw a ship floating in the darkness, illuminated by the bridge's faint light. Though its crystal shape and arrangement differed, it closely resembled Ryo-Ohki's own main body. The expression on her face as she gazed at the ship, though still young, was filled with the tender affection of an older sister or mother.

"...Final check complete... No abnormalities." Washu's faint voice came from the middle of the bridge

Ryo-Ohki started running toward the sound.

The area was a circular platform about twenty meters across. At its center sat a large, sofa-like terminal controlling this space, where Washu lay naked.

Washu slumped. Her entire body was covered in sweat, and her eyes were

vacant… She was exhausted, like a pregnant woman who had just finished giving birth.

"Myaa?"

"I'm fine."

Washu smiled as Ryo-Ohki peered into her face with worry, and then she sat up. She looked up at the ship she had poured her entire soul into, a satisfied expression on her face.

"Myaa, myaa"

"No, don't wake her up."

"Myaa?"

"That's right. The next time she wakes up will be when she meets the person destined to be her husband."

"Myaa??"

"Huh? I'm sure I told you before? Look, Ryo-Ohki should have met him in the village below too. A guy named Yamada Seina."

" Myaa!? Myaa myaa myaa!"

The moment she heard that name, Ryo-Ohki bounced up and down with such joy she might have been about to give herself a concussion, nodding vigorously.

"I see. So you were treated kindly. That's good to hear." Washu saw the delighted look on Ryo-Ohki's face and smiled with relief.

Seto's request for a ship specifically for Seina was for "the best ship possible". Since she was requesting it from Washu, that naturally meant a ship identical to Ryo-Ohki. However, simply giving Seina Ryo-Ohki herself wouldn't necessarily make it the best. A ship suited to Seina's characteristics was still necessary. More crucially, the Ryo-Ohki type featured a main unit with a sentient core, meaning compatibility between owner and vessel significantly impacted its performance.

Of course, the astral core used belonged to Widow, who wished to be with Seina. Washu herself directly performed an Astral Link with her to thoroughly examine her abilities.

(Her compatibility with Seina-dono isn't bad. But that's only because of her rationality and abilities.)

However, at Widow's request, adjustments were made to prevent feedback of not only her human memories, but even the memories stored in the Astral Sea. This meant she would essentially be reborn from infancy, becoming a different person. Consequently, Seina's abilities and character became crucial.

(After scrutinizing her reputation and Seina-dono's actual actions, I thought there would be no issues... but!)

Fearing misfortune stemming from is biased probability, many avoided Seina, inevitably skewing evaluations of his personality toward those few individuals. While his standing among them was outstanding, the problem was that these individuals were all people very close to Washu.

(Tenchi-dono, Sasami-chan, the Masaki family, Seto-dono's associates, Airi-dono... and Mikami-dono and others connected to the Kuramitsu family...)

Of course, those individuals possessed exceptional judgement and were all trustworthy. Precisely because of that, Washu harbored some anxiety—could there be leniency or oversight in her own judgment?

"Ryo-Ohki... Do you think it's good that this child's husband is Seina-dono?"

"Myaa!" At Washu's question, Ryo-Ohki nodded with a beaming smile.

"Hmm."

Sometimes, a child's intuition surpassed any accumulation of information. Washu was certain the greatest source of anxiety had been removed.

"Then, shall we entrust delivering this child to you, Ryo-Ohki?"

Washu picked up Ryo-Ohki and left the dock.

The next morning, Tenchi and the others watched Ryo-Ohki's true form emerge from the pond in front of their house, their expressions tinged with unease.

"Are you really sure she'll be okay alone?" Aeka asked as she approached Washu, looking a little troubled.

Of course, that wasn't just Aeka's opinion; it was shared by everyone present.

"Noike-dono will be watching over her, so it'll be fine."

"But didn't you say absolutely not to help her no matter what happened?"

Ryo-Ohki had once gotten lost in the mountains near the Masaki residence. It was akin to sending a child who got lost in a pool to sail the Pacific alone. Moreover, Noike would faithfully carry out Washu's orders.

"Personally, I think it's still too soon."

"Hmm... Ryoko, you did teach her how to use a compass, didn't you?"

"Of course I did, but..."

When Ryoko went to retrieve Ryo-Ohki after she got lost, she taught her how to confirm her own location and destination—in that case, Tenchi's house. No matter how vast the area, the method remained the same.

"Then she'll be fine." Washu said with absolute confidence, gazing up at the floating Ryo-Ohki.

"Well then, go ahead."

"Myaaaaaaaaaaaan!"

At Washu's signal, Ryo-Ohki instantly became a streak of light and vanished from their sight.

"Still, the thought of Ryo-Ohki going to Jurai... it feels rather strange, doesn't it?"

Recalling the time seven hundred years ago when Ryo-Ohki attacked Jurai, Aeka wore a troubled smile.

"After all, Ryo-Ohki is the only ship that ever invaded the Juraian home world and ran rampant."

Most Juraian people still remembered those events from seven hundred years ago. The official story was that the Ryo-Ohki had disappeared along with Yosho. Naturally, they had no way of knowing that Ryo-Ohki was still alive and well, living peacefully with someone connected to the Masaki family. In other words, the Ryo-Ohki was still considered an enemy by Jurai.

"If handled poorly, it could easily cause panic."

"Azusa-dono and Seto-dono will handle it well. There won’t be any problems."

"At this point, all we can do is pray Grandmother doesn't get any strange ideas." Sasami, who had been silent until then, murmured softly.

In other words, she hoped they wouldn't stage Ryo-Ohki's visit as a prank.

"It'll be fine, it'll be fine. If Ryo-Ohki is still alive, Yosho-dono's situation will be exposed like pulling on a string of potatoes, so they won't give away half-baked spoilers."

Just as Washu said, Ryo-Ohki's visit was kept top secret, and there was no panic among Jurai’s citizens.

However, the adorable humanoid Ryo-Ohki and the "First Errand" event caused, "Kyaaaa~, Ryo-chan, so cute!!!"

A near-panic erupted among some of the ladies-in-waiting, starting with Misaki, which ultimately ended up befalling Seina as a disaster.

Chapter Two: Run away! Run away!

"Jumping. We've entered hyperspace."

Before Alan had finished speaking, a fiery red light unlike the usual friction glow spread through hyperspace like flames.

With a buzzing sound, the hull began to vibrate slightly.

"What's this shaking?!"

The crew sensed something different from the usual hyperspace travel vibrations.

"Abnormal mass detected on the hull! Continuing hyperspace travel is dangerous!"

"Jump out!" Seina shouted reflexively upon hearing Kiriko's words.

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"Alright... Let the hunt begin."

Gazura stared at the empty space where Kamidake had vanished on the monitor, his body trembling with the exhilaration of hunting a major target for the first time in ages.

"Are the hounds in position?" Before Gazura could finish speaking, one of the operators shouted.

"Boss! We've detected a reaction!"

"That was quick... Okay! Check the location!"

"...!? Wh-what is this...?"

Noticing the slightly strange tone in the operator's voice, Gazura rushed over to the operator's station.

"What's up? Don't tell me you damaged the hull on the first shot? That'd be nice and easy, I guess."

"Looks like we won't get that easy. That thing covered a significant distance in a single jump. Exceeding the highest recorded value from our drone experiments."

"Huh... so it has crossed the perimeter surrounded by hounds. As expected from a ship built by a philosopher..." As Gazura muttered while staring at the monitor, another operator called out.

"Boss, the guys heading for the target have engaged!"

The dots of light on the monitor indicating the positions of each unit and Kamidake expanded, and three dots of light were visible around Kamidake.

"Was it a good hunch or luck...?"

Each operator was calculating Kamidake's possible jump direction and distance. The Hounds had chosen their ambush sectors based on their own judgment, not Gazura's orders. However, based on past data, they had a rough idea of jump distances based on the size of ships hit by paint rounds and the number of hits. The fact that they'd caught Kamidake making a jump exceeding those estimates meant they'd hit the jackpot. But their luck ended there.

"Seriously?! All three ships were sunk!"

"Damn it!"

Gazura checked the name of the sunken ship displayed on the monitor. They belonged to brothers operating in a team of three small ships—pirates renowned for their excellent teamwork, agile maneuvers, and high combat capability.

"Those guys were wiped out in an instant? This might be more troublesome than I thought."

Gazura began analyzing Kamidake's capabilities from this data. Of course, he'd meticulously checked all information up to that point, but firsthand experience yielded crucial insights. Even against ordinary opponents, the gap between data-based knowledge and actual combat experience—due to post-data growth or overlooked details—was significant. And this was the ship of that philosopher, Airi. Based on test data alone, he had no idea how much it had evolved in such a short time.

"It appears a follow-up ship has arrived, but has been shaken off. Two subsequent casualties."

"The first attack caused damage to 5..."

"The last data sent shows no damage to the target ship."

"Their crew seems highly skilled too. We probably can't count on them making mistakes."

While sensing Kamidake's unfathomable power, Gazura believed capturing Kamidake was now only a matter of time.

"Gazura."

Tarrant's Chief Adjutants image abruptly interrupted Gazura's thoughts.

"Can I help you...?" Gazura started to say, then realized he didn't know the name of the man before him.

After all, Tarrant's inner circle changed constantly. Since Gazura had been transferred from the dead Radi Shank's command to serve under Tarrant, three Chief Adjutants had come and gone. Naturally, this was due to Tarrant's purges.

(And yet, there's always someone else willing to take the job.)

He'd always found it strange, but volunteers for Tarrant's personal guard were plentiful, and the young operator before Gazura was one such candidate. Gazura doubted Tarrant possessed that level of charisma, but his arrogant, fearless actions seemed to appeal to the young. And it was undeniably the fastest way to climb the ranks.

"...Chief Adjutant."

Gazura addressed the man by his rank. If you didn't know his name, it was safest to use his rank.

"You understand, right? Tarrant-sama's orders are to capture the cargo and crew intact."

"Understood. I will make sure my subordinates fully understand this as well. We've deployed the AHP, so it's only a matter of time now."

"Don't keep Tarrant-sama waiting too long."

The young Chief Adjutant, likely born around the time Gazura became this ship's captain, said this with an arrogant attitude before cutting the communication.

"Pitiful..."

No matter how smugly he tried to act tough, it didn't suit him. To Gazura, he looked like a first-grader wearing a uniform for the first time, lugging a huge backpack. And he'd be killed off easily by Tarrant taking his anger out on him.

"I guess I'll have to try my best so that kid doesn't have to die."

Several hours after the standoff between Kamidake and Gazura, Mikagami was docked in Jurai's satellite orbit.

The bridge was still, with no one but Seto present. Then, Minaho appeared at the transport gate and hurried over to her.

"Seto-sama, we've received the first report from the Academy regarding Kamidake."

As Minaho reported, a monitor appeared before Seto.

"……I see."

After quickly scanning the report, Seto leaned back in her chair with a look of exasperation. The report detailed the search records of that transport company Kamidake had accessed before going missing.

"Considering the time lag between the access and the communication cutoff..."

"It's unlikely Kamidake was sunk. We should assume some kind of weapon was used to jam communications and navigation."

"We're checking for similar incidents. Also, once the survey ship arrives at the site, we'll conduct a detailed scan. We might learn something about the enemy weapon. Overall, it seems safe to conclude that Seina-kun received that cargo."

"It's a bit late to say this, but Seina-dono really is an unlucky child, isn't he? Though, Kiriko-chan is the biggest problem this time around."

She was referring to Kiriko carelessly accessing the transport company's database and summoning the enemy.

"I... I'm so sorry..."

Minaho held the top position among Seto's ladies-in-waiting, and their training fell under her responsibility. With five elite ladies-in-waiting, including Kiriko, performing so poorly, this was a serious matter that could even affect Minaho's position.

"Whether it was due to inexperience or Seina-dono's misfortune, I can't say. But the fact that the package reached Seina-dono might be a silver lining in this disaster."

"For us, you mean?"

"It might have been for Seina-dono too, you know♡" Seto winked at Minaho, who was frowning, then straightened up.

"No changes to the current operation! Keep the Fourth

Sentinel Fleet as the main force with the Seventh as backup. Tell the senior officers to maintain the status quo."

"Understood." Minaho bowed and hurried toward the transfer gate.

"...Perhaps it's time to request the First Sentinel Fleet to deploy again?" After confirming Minaho's transfer, Seto murmured to herself.

After several short-range jumps, Kamidake lay submerged in the deep ocean of a primitive Earth-like planet devoid of intelligent life.

"We should be able to buy some time here."

The dimly lit bridge of Kamidake, its energy reduced to the bare minimum, held everyone gathered together, including those on standby.

"The damage report is complete." Kiriko, who had been editing the video data for the report while operating the panels at incredible speed, paused and said.

"What's this?"

Before Seina's eyes, the main monitor displayed Kamidake's outer hull, completely covered

in something resembling red paint.

"Pirate graffiti, I suppose." Amane said with a twisted, sarcastic grin.

The analogy was so spot-on that everyone, including Kiriko, burst out laughing despite the situation.

"Heh, yeah... So, what Amane calls graffiti seems to be caused by surface molecules converting into mass energy due to the heat generated by the pressurization of hyperspace travel."

"I see, so that's why it shook like that... No wonder we can't make a proper jump." Amane propped her cheek on her hand and frowned.

"Then how about jumping with a shield covering the entire ship? It would consume a lot of energy, but Kamidake's generators should be capable."

"Hakuren... The thing is, it reacted to the energy of the pinpoint shield during combat too. So covering the entire ship would do the same thing."

"So short-range jumps might be possible, but long-range jumps are impossible... Being a small ship is our downfall."

The Kamidake was highly maneuverable and easily lost control with even the slightest damage or loss of balance. Amane sat deep in her seat and looked up at the ceiling, where an image of the deep sea was projected. Because the bridge was dark, the colony of creatures with luminous engines looked like the Milky Way. If it weren't for the circumstances, she would have been captivated by its beauty.

"And it's interfering with hyperspace communications too..."

Kiriko glanced at NB, prompting those familiar with its capabilities to focus their attention on it simultaneously. While the Kamidake was affected by the graffiti, communication was possible if they moved outside and created some distance. However, NB turned slightly, dismissing that possibility. No matter what kind of NB it was, long-range hyperspace communication with minimal time

delay was impossible.

There were many types of hyperspace communications. At least within the galaxy, they ranged from those capable of near-real-time communication to short-distance communications that were restricted to sub light speeds. It depended on the type of hyperspace being used, but using hyperspace for the fastest communications required a significant amount of power. Only large flagship-class battleships or ships used as communication relays could do it. Kamidake could manage it thanks to its six newly developed generators, but currently, pirate graffiti had rendered them unusable. While a simple distress signal from an escape pod was feasible for long-range transmission, it was open communication. That meant pirates would pick it up first.

In the end, the only way to communicate was to contact a station somewhere or get a boost.

"...And after jumping, when it emerges into normal space, it seems to emit a brief short-range hyperspace transmission."

"So it's a signal only the pirates can understand."

"They probably have receiving satellites scattered everywhere. ...The Academy could probably pick up the signal, but the problem is whether they'd notice the meaning hidden in the noise."

"Couldn't we use periodic jumps as a simple signal?"

"We don't know if that's possible while being pursued by pirates, and since it's a short-range transmission, it needs to be received from very close by..."

"So by the time it's received, it'll be months or years later. Any other obstacles?"

"That’s it for now. It seems to only affect things related to hyperspace technology."

"That alone is troublesome enough. Can't we just get rid of this graffiti?"

"It's probably the kind of thing that gets deactivated by some signal, but finding that signal is impossible. It might not even exist in the first place. Well, the options we can think of are: manually scraping it off, directly applying an anti-energy coating agent, or placing Kamidake in a large container for transport."

"If it vaporizes during hyperspace travel, wouldn't it disappear after a few jumps?"

"Theoretically, if we jump about thirty thousand times the same distance we've been traveling, the effect should disappear."

"Thirty thousand times... Kamidake could handle it, but the crew couldn't survive without resupply."

"What about hyperspeed flight within a planetary atmosphere, or even a close flyby of the sun..."

"Data is limited, so we can't be certain, but it seems the degree of mass conversion increases significantly when exposed to energy over a wide area. If we carelessly do something like that and convert it all into mass-energy at once, it might cause an impact equivalent to a meteorite tens of meters in size falling. Even though Airi-sama designed it, Kamidake is a general-purpose ship. Only an Imperial Ship would even consider such a gamble. Besides..." Kiriko stopped abruptly, her mouth shut tight, but everyone's gaze was fixed on Seina.

"Either way, if we rush, the ship will fall apart. If we try to do it in a way that minimizes the risk, it will take longer and the pirates will come in droves."

"We're completely trapped in a cage, aren't we?"

"What kind of cargo are these pirates pursuing so relentlessly?"

"Things happen, don't they?" Alan, who had been silent until then, muttered under his breath.

"What do you mean? If you have an opinion, say it clearly!" Amane glared at Alan, annoyed by his sarcastic, roundabout way of speaking.

"Well, it's true Kamidake and the captain could be targets for pirates."

"Exactly! That's what I wanted to say, Hakuren-san!"

Alan edged closer to Hakuren, trying to hide from Amane. But Hakuren had no intention of shielding Alan; she was merely trying to stop the pointless argument. She quickly stepped away from Alan and headed for the operator's seat.

"Either way, we're getting nowhere like this. We have casualties to tend to, so let's head to the nearest station. Kiriko-san, can we use hyperspace H559?"

"H559? That's the hyperspace from a while back, isn't it?"

"I see. The jump takes time, but it has low pressurization friction during navigation. It was the most commonly used back in the day, so we have plenty of data on it. In dense star or planetary clusters with high gravity, we might be able to mask both outgoing and incoming communications during the jump out."

"Understood. Let's depart immediately." At Seina's command, Kamidake immediately began surfacing from the deep sea.

"Standby personnel, please rest in the acceleration chamber."

"Roger."

At Kiriko's command, everyone except Seina, Kiriko, Amane, and Hakuren left the bridge.

"This is a real mess, Alan."

"Well, it was to be expected once we teamed up with that captain... What a pain in the ass. We'll definitely need to get paid extra hazard pay for this." Alan said with a huge yawn, in stark contrast to the anxious-looking Barry and Cohen.

"Yeah, you're right. But how much do you think they'll give us?"

"Well, that depends on how things go from here on out. But anyway, if we're going to enter the accelerated space, let's eat something first."

"I agree! This is the only time I'm glad to be on this ship."

Alan and his team returned to their quarters and used their ID cards to transfer a large amount of food and snacks.

"Hey, since we're doing this, let's go full throttle..."

With the food spread out before them, Cohen looked at Alan and the others as if he had something to say.

"Hmm... Before the battle that's about to come, replenishing our strength thoroughly is also our duty as crew members."

"Is that okay?" Barry looked slightly uneasy at Alan's words.

"Come on, this ship's only carrying about a fifth of its capacity. It'll be fine if we eat a little more than usual."

"True. We've eaten quite a bit before and never got called out for it."

"Well, that's settled then..."

Cohen quickly poured sparkling wine into glasses and handed them to Alan and Barry.

"Cheers!"

The three men downed their glasses of wine in one gulp and began eating, each trying to outdo the other, as if in a competitive eating contest.

Just then, Kamidake surfaced from the deep sea, sank the approaching pirate ship, ascended into space, and performed a hyperspace jump.

Chapter Three: Pan Dora

"Jump out completed, now in normal space. No abnormalities with the ship."

"Accelerating to maximum normal cruising speed"

After checking Kiriko's report, Seina gave the order in a matter-of-fact tone, a process that

had been repeated dozens, maybe hundreds of times since the pirates had graffitied the ship.

"Accelerate to maximum speed... Well, let's see what happens." Amane repeated Seina's command, swiftly performing the necessary operations and confirming the switch to autopilot.

"Alright, this is good."

Amane stretched her body and leaned back in her chair. Normally, Kiriko would have scolded her immediately, but this time she allowed Amane to take a short break after a long and difficult day of maneuvering the ship.

"There were no enemy ships encountered during the random jump, so if we calculate from the position of the last encounter, assuming they catch Kamidake during this jump, the shortest possible time to get here is three hours."

"The advantage I gained over three days is now only three hours... It makes me want to cry." Amane laughed at herself

Even that time was a valuable savings that could not have been earned without Amane's piloting, Kiriko's plan, and Kamidake's performance.

"Now it's just a matter of what they'll do next."

"At the very least, since this is within the GP sphere of influence, they shouldn't make any careless moves."

"Even if it is GP territory, we're right on the border."

"Yeah..."

Depending on the scale of the pirates likely to attack, they might have to abandon heading for their target station. Kiriko was prepared for that.

"They're cautious bastards, using paint rounds from the start. We've got to be careful."

But hours later, their fears proved unfounded. The Kamidake reached the vicinity of their target station.

"Captain, we've entered laser communication range with Station Pan Dora."

The moment Kiriko spoke, the image of a harbor control officer with a puzzled expression appeared.

"Confirming registry code. Welcome to Pan Dora... But laser communication? What happened?"

"Our hyperspace communications became unusable during a pirate engagement. We urgently need to contact Galaxy Academy. Please relay our message."

“Relay? I'm afraid the relay device between the various communication systems is damaged. After all, as far as the records show, the last time laser communication was used was over a century ago... In fact, when this transmission came in, I thought it might be some kind of malfunction or prank...” The controller said with a wry smile.

"To be honest, being such a remote station, things deemed unnecessary... excuse me. Things with low usage inevitably get put on the back burner."

"I see..."

—But now, an urgent situation had arisen.

Just as Kiriko, inwardly irritated, was about to say that to the controller, "Oh, right! Excuse me for a moment..." The controller glanced to the side and exchanged a few words with someone.

"Actually, the GP branch chief was here just a moment ago and is still in the break room. Shall I call him over?"

"Yes, please do!"

Every minute counted at this critical moment. This unexpected stroke of luck softened Kiriko's expression.

"Understood."

A minute after the exchange with the controller, a middle-aged man, seemingly having run all the way here, caught his breath before deploying a secret wall and answering the communication.

"This is Fos Douke, head of the Pan Dora GP branch. What brings headquarters to a place like this?"

"Well, actually..." Kiriko concisely explained the situation to Fos.

"...And that's why I urgently need a relay connection to GP Academy?"

A Pan Dora-class station should have at least one GP general-purpose battleship permanently stationed there. That ship would be equipped with a relay system.

"I see... Unfortunately, both ships stationed here were deployed a short while ago."

"Deployed?"

"Actually, numerous pirate ships were confirmed in this vicinity, and they were dispatched at the request of the Sector Branch head. I was here coordinating that operation..."

Outposts like this one often shared civilian ports since they lacked the resources to build dedicated ports.

“Those pirates are probably the same ones who attacked Kamidake.”

“Maybe that's why they haven't come this way.”

“I'll send a report to the Academy from here. Do you have any other instructions?”

"Thank you. So, upon arrival, could you please arrange for the rescue of the injured, a medium-sized container capable of carrying the Kamidake, and a towing vessel?"

“Please send the rescuer's data. And as for the medium-sized container...” Fos frowned slightly and stared intently at the cargo-related data. Then, as he attempted to transfer the data to Kamidake, he noticed the relay was malfunctioning.

"Just a moment..."

Once Fos had simplified the data, he transferred it to his ID card and inserted it into the laser communication reader. GP ID cards were compatible with all systems officially adopted by the Galactic Federation, as well as those with high adoption rates. Although their functionality was significantly limited, they were capable of handling simple data exchanges.

"How’s it going?" Seina stepped down from the captain's chair and peered at the monitor Kiriko was watching.

At a remote station like this, transport costs were high, leaving no room to spare for inactive ships. Staring at the transferred data, Kiriko was rearranging the cargo sequence for each container like a block puzzle, trying to make space in the container to carry the Kamidake.

"It's no good... Putting any of them off risks disrupting the station's operations."

"What about NB?"

"Kiriko-san's right... Besides, there are hardly any ships capable of long-range jumps."

Just as resignation began to settle in, Fos suddenly brightened, as if he'd noticed something.

"Ah! Hold on a moment! I recall a ship that delivered supplies for the deployment fleet..."

Foss looked down briefly and resumed his earlier task. Several seconds later, he looked up. Simultaneously, data on a certain cargo ship was transmitted.

"It entered port registered under GP jurisdiction, so it wasn't listed in the civilian transport fleet registry. It can't make it to the Academy, but this ship's home port station has a regular route to Central."

Although several cargo contracts were assigned to that container, there was ample space to load the Kamidake.

"Thank you for your cooperation. Estimated arrival at Pan Dora is 2100 hours."

"Roger."

The moment the communication ended and Fos's image cut out, a wave of relief washed over the Kamidake's bridge.

"We can't relax yet, but it looks like we'll manage." Kiriko smiled at Seina. It was a private smile, one she hadn't shown in a long time.

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The ship arrived at Pan Dora safely without incident.

The transport ship carrying Kamidake had been anchored slightly away from Pan Dora, its container bay open and ready for immediate departure. Following the guidance probe's instructions, they stowed Kamidake inside the container. A small spacecraft then entered Kamidake's hangar bay.

"Good work."

Foss saluted Seina and Kiriko who had come to greet him, then signaled to the paramedics waiting behind. The paramedics received the transport capsule containing the sleeping deliveryman from Amane and Hakuren and attached a terminal to it.

"!"

Amane, sensing something amiss, took a half-step forward.

"How is he?" Foss interrupted her as he addressed the paramedics.

"He seems stable. As long as he stays calm, there shouldn't be any problems."

"I see. That's good. Then I'll leave the rest to you."

After confirming the deliveryman's condition, the paramedic promptly stowed the capsule in the spacecraft. Once that task was complete, Fos turned toward Seina and his crew.

"Chief Fos, did you receive any instructions from the Academy? If possible, I'd like to speak with them directly..."

"I'm afraid I can't grant that permission."

"!?"

Everyone except Seina understood the implication of Fos's words and tensed.

"Ah, I'm a fully-fledged GP crew member, and there are no pirates here, so rest assured."

"What do you mean?"

In contrast to Kiriko and the others, Seina, unable to grasp the meaning of Fos's words, looked back and forth between Kiriko and Fos with a puzzled expression.

"Oh! So you're the young captain everyone's been talking about?"

Seeing Seina, Fos smiled gently, like a grandfather looking at his grandchild.

"Places like Pan Dora, which are located in the border zone of multiple powers, are in a very complicated position. Trade with not only the Galactic Federation but also pirates is an important lifeline."

"...I see, so that's what it means."

Seeing Seina instantly grasp the situation and regain his composure, Fos looked slightly surprised.

"Hmm. I'd heard rumors you were merely a figurehead captain for route decisions... I see. It seems there's more to it than that. Without further ado, I'd like you to accompany this ship to a certain sector."

"That's... all?"

This time, it was Kiriko's turn to look surprised.

"The Galactic Federation is also a crucial trading partner... Besides, I am technically affiliated with the GP. If you all just stay calm and proceed to the target sector as planned, I will personally handle the courier's situation. So please bear with it for about twelve hours." With that, Fos gave Seina a deep bow and boarded the starship.

Watching the spacecraft depart from Kamidake's hangar, Kiriko bowed deeply to Seina.

"I'm sorry, Captain. My poor judgment led to this... If only I'd sent NB out to make that hyperspace transmission back then..."

The communication boost at the station would likely have been blocked, but at the very least, they could have deduced something had happened on Pan Dora.

"Stop it, Kiriko-san. If we're talking about judgment, I'm the captain of this ship."

"Alright, alright, you two. It's not over yet, so who's to blame doesn't really matter, right? Well, at least we shouldn't complain that they didn't demand the cargo or our surrender by taking that delivery guy hostage." Amane said in a cheerful tone, then winked at Hakuren, who looked more serious than Kiriko.

Amane's tone and demeanor lightened the mood, and Hakuren's tense expression softened.

"The fact that a deal with the pirates was made beforehand means that, depending on our actions, Pan Dora could have been caught up in the pirate attack."

Meaning the hostages weren't just that deliveryman, but Pan Dora's residents too.

"I see. So the stationed fleet was lured away by the pirates. ...And to protect the now-undefended Pan Dora, that branch chief made a deal with the pirates..."

"If that's the case, these terms are exceptionally generous."

Of course, Pan Dora was undoubtedly a crucial transit point for pirates—for disposing of loot and importing Federation goods. Yet, despite the pirates holding overwhelming advantage, they didn't demand cargo handover or Kamidake's surrender. That was solely thanks to Branch Chief Fos's negotiation.

"On top of that, he casually gave us the estimated time to our destination. Still, the situation hasn't really improved much."

"Hijacking a transport ship wouldn't work either, would it?"

"We should assume they've taken precautions."

"Hmph... The name's no good, is it? Pan Dora, after all."

"The name? The station's?"

"In Earth mythology, there's a box that contained all the evils of the world. It's named after the girl who opened it—Pandora's Box."

"So that Pandora girl is basically Kamidake. Well, since things have come to this, there's no point in struggling."

"We have twelve hours until our destination, so everyone should rest first. For now, we'll all meet in the mess hall in six hours... NB, you handle monitoring Kamidake's main computer and surveillance."

"Roger that. Leave it to me."

"Is that acceptable, Captain?"

"Yes."

As Seina nodded in response to Kiriko's question, the vibration of the ship carrying Kamidake beginning to move was transmitted.

"Looks like we're moving. Well then, I'd better get some rest." Amane stretched widely and headed toward the elevator seat.

The others followed suit.

(Come to think of it... wasn't hope the last thing left in Pandora's Box...?) Kiriko thought that for a moment, but (Oh dear, what am I doing? This isn't the time to be pondering such unrealistic possibilities.)

With a wry smile, Kiriko followed after Amane and the others. But Pan Dora did possess that "hope."

The area around Pan Dora's main spaceport, like others, was concentrated with business

districts. Ian Northern was located in a rented building in a district off the main street.

The spacious office was filled with stacks of boxes. Four women, presumably staff, were busily organizing inventory lists in a corner, almost pushed aside by the cargo. Nearby, Ian's bodyguard was sorting boxes. Beyond a simple partition, Ian was communicating with someone.

After his deal with Tatsuki Ringo, Ian expanded his network for converting junk into cash and set his sights on pirates. Pirate organizations varied in scale, from large fleets of dozens of ships to just a single small, secondhand vessel. Their intelligence gathering capabilities ranged from those rivaling minor nations to others operating on a haphazard, ad-hoc basis. This meant they couldn't precisely target and seize only the specific goods they needed. It was a mixed bag, and naturally, their cargo often contained baffling items. But even if the loot turned out to be junk, it was still hard-earned spoils, and many pirates found it difficult to simply discard it.

Space is vast—unlike on Earth, unwanted items were tossed into large containers to prevent scattering. When one filled up, simply attach another. There was no risk of becoming a hoarder's house and drawing complaints from neighbors. And containers accumulated over generations become true time capsules. Within them, treasures of immense value—by universal standards or personal ones—sometimes lay dormant.

"...So, what exactly happens to our shipment?"

Ian suppressed the urge to yell at the shipping company operator on the other end of the monitor, who wore a polite yet impersonal smile, and asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

Places like this, off the regular shipping routes, were highly insular. For outsiders to be accepted required time, patience, and above all, demonstrating a genuine intent to settle down and do business here. That was precisely why Ian, the CEO, had come here in person.

But the first necessity was money. Ian had doled out large sums to various people to open an office here. It was more than what it would cost to establish a single-floor office in prime real estate on the Academy's outer ring. And just as he had finally established connections with several pirates, purchased surplus goods, and was about to send some of it to the sorting plant, he got caught up in the trouble between Kamidake and the pirates.

“The cargo ship will arrive at its destination approximately thirty-five hours late, but in this airspace, compensation for delays is not applicable...”

"You will issue a delay certificate, won't you?" Ian cut off the operator.

Listening to any more of their excuses wouldn't improve the situation; it would just be a waste of time.

"Of course."

"Please use the overpaid shipping fee refund as a deposit towards the next shipping fee."

"Understood."

The moment the operator finished speaking, Ian cut the line.

"What a disaster, boss."

"!?"

At the perfect moment when Ian was about to vent his frustration on the desk, a young woman with a sleepy expression approached in a relaxed tone.

"Kururuka... What do you want?" Ian tried to sound as calm as possible, but even he could hear the anger in his own voice.

"S-sorry." Realizing his mistake, Ian apologized reflexively.

Kururuka, however, seemed completely unfazed and displayed a small monitor in front of him.

"That cargo ship earlier... looks like it was used to transport a GP vessel. The destination was the pirates, though."

"What!?" Ian frantically looked at Kururuka's monitor.

Kururuka was the daughter of a prominent figure on Pan Dora. That said, she was the eighth of 10 sons and daughters. She rarely attended school yet had excellent grades, always looking bored as she wandered around aimlessly playing. Getting a job here was also due to her parents' orders. Well, to Ian, it felt like he'd been saddled with a nuisance.

Initially, Ian had no intention of giving Kururuka any actual work, just keeping her on the payroll. Or rather, judging by her usual behavior, he didn't think she had any interest in working. Kururuka felt the same way, but surprisingly, the job of collecting junk and checking it piqued her interest.

"It's like a treasure hunt, isn't it?" Saying that, Kururuka began participating in the work enthusiastically.

With this new direction of interest, Kururuka began to fully unleash the hidden competence she possessed. Moreover, with her wide circle of acquaintances, she had her own information network that was no less extensive than her father's, who was the face of the operation.

"Kamidake... Yamada Seina!!"

"Yamada Seina? That guy who attracts pirates, right? I kinda wanted to meet him."

"You said the destination was pirates earlier? Do you know where it's being shipped?"

"That's not possible. But the transmitter we attached to the company's cargo just picked up a signal."

"A signal? But the container should be shielded...!! I see!"

"Yeah. Probably when they loaded Kamidake into the container. If it reaches its destination, maybe..."

The moment Ian heard Kururuka's words, he tried to contact his company's bank. But he paused, looking at Kururuka's face as if hesitating. He was checking if this leak might cause trouble for anyone Kururuka knew at Pan Dora. Of course, it also affected Ian's future work.

Kururuka gave a small smile just as the bank representative answered the call. Ignoring the representative's usual greeting, Ian switched to another line. In other words, the communication with the bank was a cover.

Without much delay, the connection was established with the intended party.

"Long time no see..."

"How about the information on Yamada Seina?"

As Ian bowed respectfully and began speaking cautiously, Kururuka suddenly popped her head up beside him and started talking.

"Hey, wait!"

As Ian, his face turning pale, tried to push Kururuka aside, the person on the other end of the communication, Tatsuki Ringo, smiled and asked, "Is Seina-sama at Pan Dora?"

Despite the fact that reverse tracking shouldn't be possible, she pinpointed Ian and the others' location.

"Huh, Seto-sama's 'Hyena Corps is impressive, isn't it? President, move aside a bit." Kururuka shoved Ian, who looked like he was about to faint, aside with her butt along with his chair, then took her place in front of the monitor.

"A little while ago, we packed the Kamidake into a container along with our company's cargo and shipped it off. Our cargo is apparently arriving at its destination station about thirty-five hours late... Oh, and the hull is covered in something like red paint."

"Is that so..." Ringo's expression darkened slightly as she hesitated. But she quickly looked up and asked, "You said it was with your shipment, right? Could you tell me the tracking code for that package?"

And with that, she smiled again. The very next moment, funds were deposited into Ian's company account. Responding instantly, Kururuka also sent the transmission code.

"Hmm..." Kururuka leaned closer to the monitor and stared intently at Ringo's face.

"What is it?"

"Princess... you're adorable."

"!!!"

Ringo was startled that Kururuka had seen through her special feelings for Seina. But Kururuka had no ulterior motive or ill will; she had simply voiced what she genuinely thought.

"Heh..." Ringo couldn't help but laugh at that friendly expression.

"My apologies, I suppose I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Tatsuki Ringo. And you?"

“I am Kururuka Pan Dora”

"I see. Well then, Kururuka-san, Ian-dono, thank you for the information. I must be going now, so I'll take my leave."

"Bye-bye~"

Beside Kururuka, who waved cheerfully, Ian sat frozen in his chair, looking as if the end of the world had come.

"You... you!"

"No way, Boss. Keep it brief. Especially when it's urgent like this time ♡ Now then, I'll take my reward."

Smiling sweetly at Ian, who looked like he might cry, Kururuka took a cigar from the box on his desk and sniffed it.

"Mmm, nice smell."

Kururuka's hobby was sniffing the scent of tobacco leaves. She didn't light them up to smoke. She simply enjoyed the aroma. But the next moment, Kururuka shoved the cigar up her nose.

"Gah! I don't mind you enjoying the aroma, but how many times do I have to tell you not to shove it up your nose like that? It's disgusting!"

"Hooi!"

No matter how many times Ian, family, or friends scolded her, Kururuka's habit wouldn't change. She returned to her seat with the cigar still shoved up her nose.

"She was quite the character."

Even after the call ended, Ringo couldn't stop laughing. Meeting a new valuable talent was one thing, but seeing Ian flustered and struggling to keep up with her was hilarious—she could relate to it all too well.

"Ringo, Ringo! Honoka wants to talk."

Honoka, held by Tōdō, was frolicking like a dog spotting its owner with a leash. Lately, Honoka had learned to communicate through human conversation and was desperate to talk to someone. Originally, Royal Trees could communicate through special mental waves, making conversation unnecessary. However, that form of communication had distance limitations when interacting with anyone other than their master who held the key. Because of this, she showed particular interest in communication as a means of conversation, enabling long-distance talk. Every time Ringo received a call, Tōdō had to restrain her.

"That was about work, so let's talk another time."

"I also wanted to talk to Kururuka."

Honoka wandered off toward the crew quarters looking dejected. She knew someone resting there would talk to her.

"What a handful. I just hope she doesn't bother the people on standby too much..."

"That's just how kids are. She'll settle down soon enough."

"I hope so."

"Ringo-sama, Minaho-sama has requested you come to Mikagami-sama immediately."

"To Mikagami?"

The timing of the call was undoubtedly about the information mentioned earlier. But the exchange with Kururuka was being sent to Seto in real time. There was no reason for Ringo to go see Seto now.

"Understood... I just hope it's not about some special budget request."

It was only natural that Ringo, who was in charge of accounting, couldn't think of any other reason for the summons. But the reason Ringo was called was completely unexpected.

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"Seto-sama. We cannot allocate any more budget. You'll have to make do with what we have now!" Ringo declared the moment she saw Seto's face on Mikagami's bridge

Strike first to win! Show even the slightest weakness and you lose.

"……"

Seto, Minaho, and the operators all froze, staring at Ringo's face as if time itself had stopped.

The operators were the first to snap out of it, "Heh... Hahahahaha."

Their desperate attempts to stifle their laughter were almost pitiable to watch.

"...See? It's all because Seto-sama made things too difficult." Minaho said in a reproachful tone, recovering from the shock at the whimpering sounds leaking from the operators.

"They say you should buy hardship when you're young."

"If that's the case, then it's the splendid result of your education, isn't it?"

Minaho's sigh pushed the operators past their breaking point. Like balloons pricked by needles, they burst into uncontrollable laughter all at once.

"……What can I do for you?" Ringo asked as if nothing had happened, finally realized she'd misunderstood the situation amidst the operators' roaring laughter.

"The reason we asked you to come today is because we wanted you to take command of the search for Seina-dono."

"Se-Seina-sama? But I'm..." Ringo stopped herself from saying she belonged to the accounting department.

Seto's words were an order. After considering various possibilities, she knew that once she said it, there would be no retraction.

"It's about time you started to give some responsibility to your subordinates, don't you think? If you need reinforcements, you can prioritize that."

This order from Seto carried the intention of gaining experience, looking ahead to building the next generation of the organization. But behind it lay a part of Seto's amusement.

(She's pulling me away from Accounting temporarily to scheme something, isn't she? And...)

By involving Seina, she intended to set up a rematch with Kiriko.

"Understood. It's also an opportunity to review the accounting aspects of the Intelligence Department."

Ringo, too, had accumulated experience under Seto for a long time.

(I won't be so easily toyed with, Seto-sama.)

A smile that would make even Seto shudder touched Ringo's lips.

"Huh!? Wait, Ringo-chan?"

"This is bad. If Ringo-chan directly handles business restructuring..."

She'd undoubtedly unleash her full capabilities and create an Information Department that prioritized efficiency with a remarkably low budget. Naturally, Seto's personal preferences wouldn't be involved in the slightest.

"Ringo-chan! We're only giving you command authority over the Kamidake investigation. It's not a blank check!"

"Understood. I'll only use it as a benchmark to infer the overall picture." Ringo answered with a beaming smile.

To Seto, it felt like salt to a slug or sunlight to a vampire.

"R-Ringo-chan... You're terrifying."

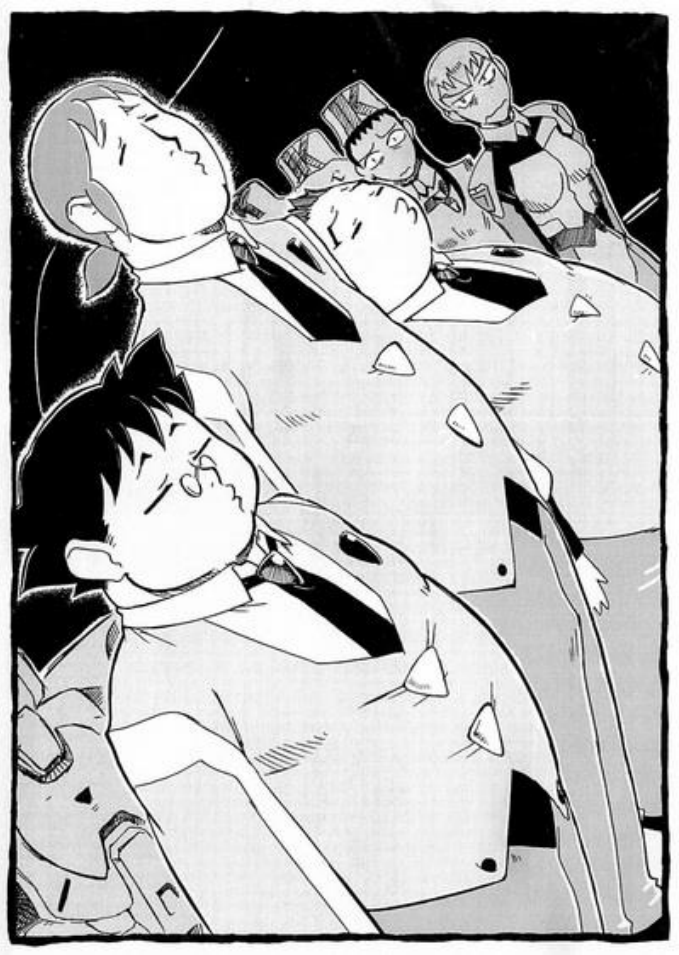
"Then I'll get started on the task right away."

Ringo bowed to Seto, who was frozen in shock, then summoned an operator and began her work. Having prepared in advance for personnel changes in the accounting department after her departure, Ringo completed the handover in mere minutes and took command of the Kamidake search.

"A classic case of the strategist being undone by her own schemes. Or perhaps a snake in the grass?" Minaho delivered the final blow in a matter-of-fact tone to Seto, who was slumped limply against the sofa armrest.

Six standard hours after Kamidake was transported in the container, a commotion erupted on Kamidake's bridge.

"The remaining food supplies, calculated at the minimum intake level, won't last a day." Kiriko's tone was utterly cold and clinical.



"We have recycling systems for drinking water, but regarding food supplies, unfortunately..."

Originally a test vessel, the Kamidake was not designed for long-term voyages. At most, it was meant for a month, and even then, not without port calls.

"To begin with, this ship wasn't designed for solo operations. And this test mission was only supposed to last a week. ...We had three months' worth of supplies, including emergency luxury items. How the hell did they manage to...?"

Amane stared in disbelief at the sight before her: the plump figures of Alan, Barry, and Cohen. This was the result of a month spent in the highest

acceleration space-time, living a life of pure gluttony and idleness.

"Well... we were just trying to get ourselves in peak physical condition to survive this crisis..."

"Peak physical condition, huh?"

Alan and his team others arrived at the bridge drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. Their words held no persuasive power whatsoever. Of course, given their actions and personality analysis, this outcome was foreseeable. Kiriko had anticipated that the Spartan effect from their shipmates would last a little longer. But Alan and the others' utter failure far exceeded even that prediction.

"Kiriko-san. Please use all the officer-grade stockpiles and calculate it equally for everyone."

"Even then, it would only last about three days." Kiriko answered Seina's question without hesitation.

"Well, I suppose we'll just have to make do." Amane said with a smile.

This eased the tense atmosphere on the bridge. But naturally, it wasn't just Amane; the other crew members weren't letting Alan and the others off the hook either. They were furious enough to boil over, and if they were in Seina's position, they'd be punching them.

"Now, everyone return to your stations and resume your checks." Seina, deciding further pursuit was a waste of time, immediately gave the order.

Alan rushed to the captain's chair and whispered, "Um... Captain. We're doing our best, in our own way, thinking of this ship and you. Please understand that much!"

Those words were blatantly false, no matter how gullible one might be. But the fact that he directed them solely at Seina was Alan's sly, cunning side.

——Everything they did was for Seina's sake. The current situation was Seina's fault, due to his skewed probability bias. And they were the benefactors who had looked after him since he left Earth.

——The responsibility for this lies with Seina. Please don't report it to upper management.

That's what Alan's eyes were saying.

"Personally, I intend to take those words at face value, but the final decision rests with Airi-sama."

"What?!"

"Since everything happening on Kamidake is subject to intelligence gathering, unfortunately, my authority doesn't extend that far. So if you want to make amends, I think it depends on

your actions going forward."

This was the same situation as before, when Seina alone had calmly handled the situation when Miki's classmates tried to seek revenge. If it were just Seina personally suffering, Alan and the others might have gotten their way. But this matter concerned the lives of the entire Kamidake crew. In times like this, Seina never let himself be swayed by emotion. That was the reason he had survived amidst such overwhelming odds.

"R-right, understood."

Overwhelmed by Seina's cold, steely gaze, Alan and the others slunk off toward the elevator at the rear of the bridge, reserved for non-crew members.

"Normally, only a truly veteran captain could pull off a look like that... Seeing Seina like that in moments like this is almost painful to watch." Amane glanced at Alan and the others before turning her attention back to Seina.

"True. But we're equally to blame for putting him in that position. We failed to properly grasp their actions."

"Right. Anyway, we have to get Seina back to the Academy at least."

"Right. NB, what's the situation inside the container?"

"Communication is impossible. It appears to be a shielded container. All the cargo except Kamidake seems to be assorted scrap. Nothing edible or usable, looks like."

"Assorted scrap? Why bother with that?"

"Probably just collected stuff tossed into old containers by bankrupt companies or deceased people. Sometimes you find some real gems in there, you know."

"Think there's anything usable?"

"Even if there are treasures, I doubt there's anything we need right now. Mostly just old junk. It's more like gambling than business."

"Got it. Yeah, things don't always work out that conveniently."

Amane and Kiriko nodded to each other and returned to their work.

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"...That container looks like it could be useful." Alan, who had been secretly peeking at Kiriko and the others from behind the unit, muttered softly.

"Hey Alan, let's hurry up. We'll get yelled at again."

"Yeah, I'm coming." Alan jumped onto the elevator where Barry and Cohen were waiting.

An hour later, the crew members who had completed their checks on Kamidake had all gathered in the mess hall below the bridge.

"Apart from the malfunction in the hyperspace systems caused by the exterior paint, no abnormalities were found in any of Kamidake's systems."

"The transport ship carrying our vessel is scheduled to arrive at its destination in about four hours. We anticipate engaging pirates immediately upon arrival. This battle will likely require near-constant duty. Please confirm your rotation assignments accordingly."

"Um, I have an idea..." Alan raised his hand as Kiriko finished her explanation. His face radiated confidence, even a sense of ease.

(This is the plan I desperately came up with to redeem that little blunder. Once they hear this, they'll realize just how indispensable I am to this ship... Heh heh heh)

"Permission to speak."

"We were with you when you first arrived at the Academy, when you first went on a training voyage, and of course, when you took your first command as captain."

"So, what exactly is your plan?" Fed up with Alan's drawn-out preamble, Amane cut straight to the chase, as if wasting time on meaningless preliminaries was pointless.

"Well, basically, what I'm saying is... we need the Captain to leave this ship along with that luggage..." Alan deliberately left his sentence hanging, eager to gauge the reaction to his brilliant plan.

"What the hell do you mean!?" Amane raised her voice slightly, though it was clearly an act.

Just as Amane had anticipated, Alan raised his hand as if to silence her, as if he'd been waiting for that reaction.

"Now, calm down and hear me out, alright? First, we'll have the captain board the escape pod inside that container—the one holding the cargo. Of course, to avoid triggering the weight check, we'll transfer cargo of equal weight to Kamidake."

"I see. Then let's hurry."

"Right. We don't have much time."

After briefly confirming Alan's opinion, Amane and the others stood up curtly.

"Ah, wait! We're not done talking yet! We were thinking of accompanying you as the captain's escorts, just in case."

"If we're not there, the food will last longer, too." Alan and his team desperately tried to explain their true intentions as they hurried after Kiriko and the others.

"Got it, got it."

"So that settles the earlier matter... Oh, and just to be clear, this proposal was made by yours truly, Alan. That's properly recorded in the minutes, right?"

"That's sneaky, Alan! This was a plan we three came up with together!"

"Got it, got it. We don't have time, let's hurry!"

Pulling away from the clinging Alan and his team, Amane and the bridge crew sat down on the elevator chairs.

At nearly the same moment, on Mikagami's bridge, Ringo had finished assembling the search party for Kamidake. Even Seto could see it was at a passable level, showing how well Ringo had observed and evaluated people all along. Sadly, though, that was the result of pouring her heart and soul into cost-cutting and cost-effectiveness.

"It's good that it's Seina-kun's search mission, isn't it?" Minaho whispered softly to Seto.

This was because the search involved Seina, Ringo's greatest benefactor, allowing for personnel selections that disregarded the cost-effectiveness criteria that could be called an accountant's instinct. That said, it also showcased the true prowess of a capable accountant. Those deemed useless, unqualified, or unnecessary, along with contractors, were ruthlessly cut.

"Tell the subcontractors it's a test for the next commander candidate."

"Yes." Minaho nodded, stifling a laugh at Seto's mutter, which sounded like a child disappointed after having their toys thrown away by their mother.

It wasn’t uncommon for personnel changes to follow a leadership change. Sometimes, it was necessary to shake off the organizational rust—the entanglements that held things back. But this time, what Ringo cut away was almost entirely the part of Seto’s work that was just for fun.

"Ringo-sama, connected to Academy Chairperson Airi-sama and GP Academy Principal Mikami-sama."

"Copy."

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"It's been a while. I apologize for the suddenness, but I'd like to request custody of Ryoko Balta, who is currently detained at your facility." Ringo, on the other side of the monitor, stood up and bowed respectfully.

For Airi and Mikami, who had known her for years, Ringo was like family—no, practically a daughter—and such formalities were unnecessary. But this was Ringo's way of stating she kept her personal and professional lives separate, and that Airi and the others need not hold back with her.

"Seto-sama explained that Ringo-dono has been assigned to search for Kamidake, but you mean to use Ryoko Balta for that search?"

"Time is of the essence. I request an immediate response."

"I see... but I can't do that."

"Then may I borrow Elma-san?" Ringo, who immediately understood the meaning of Airi's words, asked.

"That's fine with me ♡" Airi flashed a bright smile and glanced at Mikami beside her.

Mikami gave a small nod and immediately began notifying the relevant parties.

"Thank you."

"I have preparations to make too, so please handle the negotiations with Elma directly." Airi granted Ryoko permission to communicate from her cell, then immediately cut the connection.

“Even if you didn't know, trying to take away your chance? That's pretty bold of her, isn't it?” Airi said cheerfully and looked at Mikami.

"Oh, that sounds rather rude. If you mean my role, there will be plenty of opportunities ahead. Besides, this time the girl herself wants to take a backseat, so I have no complaints."

"Right. Then let's hurry with our preparations. For now, Ryoko... no, Elma—I'll go pick her up. The conversation should be over by then." Airi quickly gave instructions to several people, then skipped off toward the transfer gate.

"Still, Seto-sama really went and did something unnecessary... Well, I suppose it's a relief we didn't have to play our trump card..."

Mikami watched Airi leave, smiling. Yet her eyes held not a trace of her usual gentleness, instead radiating a chilling, seductive glint. There was no doubt about it—she too was one of those wolves in sheep's clothing.

Ryoko Balta's cell was a special one, the same one used to detain Widow. Its main purpose was to prevent her from coming into contact with outsiders, not to mention preventing her from escaping.

That said, Ryoko was granted access—albeit only to Airi's private server. That server collected and stored information from across the entire Academy, allowing access to highly sensitive data.

"Number S-4439, Ryoko Balta. You have an incoming communication. Per Special Provision 112, the content of this communication will not be recorded. I repeat, Special Provision 11..."

The guard's voice, delivered in a matter-of-fact tone, abruptly cut off. In its place, an image of Ringo appeared.

"This is the first time I've seen you in that form, Ryoko Balta-san."

"Tatsuki, Ringo-sama..."

"As you are already aware, Yamada Seina-sama's Kamidake is missing."

Combining the information Ryoko had accessed from the database, it was easy to predict Kamidake's disappearance with Elma's abilities.

"Its whereabouts remained unknown until just now, when it was confirmed that it was loaded onto a cargo ship at Station Pan Dora and transported somewhere. Arrangements are in place to determine the destination within a few hours, but we believe this will be our only chance to track Kamidake's movements." Ringo displayed various data as she spoke.

"...Betray my comrades?"

Ultimately, this was Ryoko's biggest dilemma. Using the Guild's information network to aid hostile Academy personnel. Of course, Ryoko was here now precisely because she'd been used by those very allies, and she understood that. But only one faction had sought to exploit her, and if possible, eliminate her.

"Do you believe that would not benefit your comrades?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Jurai's history might show us a path forward." With that, Ringo smiled brightly.

"No way!!?"

Even among pirates, there were those who wished to develop planets and settle down. But no matter how much they developed, as long as they remained pirates, Galactic Federation law deemed ownership of such territories as shared property belonging to the nation holding the space sector or the Federation itself, subject to confiscation. Attempting to defend it by force was futile; the disparity in military strength between pirates and the Galactic Federation was overwhelming.

Pirates could control vast territories precisely because they had no fixed settlements. Suppressing widely dispersed, mobile pirates required significant military and financial resources, making their complete eradication nearly impossible. But a developed planet was fixed in place and immovable. The more it was developed, the more certain it was that the Galactic Federation will eventually seize it.

(For nations, ownership of colonized planets is recognized. Furthermore, once arrested, pirates can smoothly transition to civilian life if the issue of their acceptance is resolved.)

Arrest itself became a catalyst for changing their mindset. Of course, not all would follow this path, but the number of problematic pirates should became quite small.

(With Seina-kun's power, perhaps... No, its usefulness has already been proven. If we could gather the widely scattered pirates...)

This was a good chance to change how pirates operated. But there was one problem.

"All my statements are approved in the name of Kamiki Seto Jurai." Ringo said as she sensed Ryoko's concerns.

It was tantamount to Seto—no, Jurai—promising support until the territorial space and state functions capable of accepting the pirates could be established.

“Ahhh!”

Even Ryoko didn't think everything would go smoothly right away. It was still a fragile path, one that seemed like it could snap at any moment. But at least, it was something Ryoko herself, as the leader of one group, could accept. Then, the only feelings left within Ryoko were the two Imperial Gems she held tightly in her hand, the ones she had received from Seina.

The day she first met Seina, the days she lived with Seina as Elma, the feelings she had during Miki's incident—all flooded Ryoko's heart.

"Well then, I'll leave it to you." Seeing Ryoko's expression, Ringo smiled contentedly.

Then, after confirming Airi had entered, Ringo ended the communication.

"Let's go, Elma."

"Yes." Ryoko smiled and nodded at Airi's words.

Chapter Four: To a New Battlefield

The transport ship carrying the Kamidake arrived at its destination as scheduled. A short distance away, around 30 pirate ships were anchored.

"Boss, they're here."

On Gazura's bridge, the operator who confirmed this looked toward Gazura.

"Good. Spread out and encircle them. Tell the transport to detach the containers and halt at a distance. The inspection team will stand by until the signal... though I doubt they're that stupid."

"What a hassle. It'd be easier to just shoot them down."

“Don't forget! We absolutely have to retrieve the cargo and the two crew members. Besides, we promised ‘Pan Dora’ we would.”

"Can't we just ignore that part?"

Gazura approached the young operator and placed his left hand lightly on the operator's head.

"Maintaining an organization, you see, isn't that simple. Whether we're turning the goods we've stolen into cash or swapping them for other items, we need those kinds of loopholes."

"S-sorry." The young operator flushed crimson and bowed his head.

“You don’t need to be so concerned about this, but please make sure you follow your orders.”

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"The transport ship has stopped."

The moment Kiriko said that, a slight vibration reached Kamidake.

"Guess they'll have to detach the container after all... Makes sense." Amane said and looked toward the operator seats ahead.

Alan and the others sat there, looking awkwardly downcast.

"Well, it wasn't a bad idea in theory. But in enemy territory, where hiding spots are extremely limited, hide-and-seek is pointless."

"Captain, the transport ship is moving out."

"Proceed with the operation once the transport ship has moved to a secure location."

"Roger."

The main monitor displayed a coordinate 3D model of the projected combat damage zone centered on Kamidake. The transport slowly moved out of the damage zone.

"Start the engines! Purge the container's outer wall as soon as it reaches criticality!"

"Engine start, 20 seconds until critical! 19, 18..."

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"Captain! High-energy reaction detected inside the container!"

"Assign each ship to target their predicted escape route! Take them down when they start moving!"

Simultaneously with Gazura's order, pirate ships opened fire in unison. But suddenly, the outer walls of the container carrying Kamidake began to shatter and separate in all directions.

"The container's outer walls!"

"Those bastards are sharp!"

The container walls acted as shields, dispersing the energy of the bombardment. Weaving through the gaps in the ships' fire, Kamidake transitioned to sub light speed.

"Target has reached combat speed!"

"It's coming! All ships, maintain vigilance!" Gazura shouted just as Kamidake initiated a short-range jump.

Ten seconds later, the explosion of one of their ships lit up the main monitor.

"03 sunk! Ahh, 17 was also attacked—no, sunk!"

"Damn, they're serious."

"Seriously!?"

"They're seriously trying to wipe us all out!"

Gazura asked a stupid question, then slammed his fist hard into the back of the young operator's seat.

"Hee!"

"All ships, tighten defenses! Three-ship formation!"

"22 sunk!"

"Dammit! Stop dawdling!"

With each ship operating independently as they were now, providing support was difficult. Pirate ships were typically specialized for speed and attack, and in that sense, the Kamidake—designed as Jurai's next-generation general-purpose vessel—was no different. Few ships could defeat the latest model, the Kamidake designed by the Academy's philosopher, in a single engagement. Still, crowding them together too much would be counterproductive. Use ships with relatively strong defenses as shields, have the remaining ships conduct diversionary attacks, and then narrow the entire small formation's position to corner the Kamidake.

"Enemy ship approaching!"

An image of Kamidake appeared on the monitor, and two objects were fired from it.

"Sh-Shield Breakers!! We can't evade in time!"

"They have such weapons!?"

Along with the operator's scream, intense light and plasma discharges enveloped the ship.

Then the shock of the attack hit the vessel.

"Dammit!"

The bridge lighting, subjected to the violent shock, switched to emergency lights. All but a few monitors went dark, cutting off information from the outside world. Gazura, clinging to the young operator's seat, looked around with a surprised expression.

"What the hell... It must have been a direct hit!"

Under normal circumstances, the shields would have vanished, and Gazura and the others, hit directly, should have vaporized from the explosion's energy.

"System rebooting." With the operator's voice, the monitors came back online.

"Air defense monitoring! Check the intel, hurry!" Gazura grabbed the young operator's collar, who was slumped over the console holding his head, and yanked him up roughly.

"R-roger that." The young operator replied with a face ready to cry, wiped tears and snot from his eyes with his sleeve, and began the ship's systems check.

"...The main propulsion system is down, but both auxiliary systems are undamaged. Navigation is unaffected."

"What the hell?" Just as Gazura, who had witnessed Kamidake's abilities, tilted his head in confusion.

"Ahh, 02's!!"

At the young operator's cry, Gazura looked up. The image of the ship next to the Gazura vessel flashed into his eyes.

"So that's where the shot hit. I see."

"02! 02, respond!"

"It's useless! The Shield Breaker hit the hull directly!"

Though equipped with a large weapons unit at the rear, the 02 ship was smaller than the Kamidake. A shield breaker capable of completely nullifying a large ship's shields and inflicting severe damage on the hull itself when fired by two ships would, if it struck a single small ship, easily nullify its shields and vaporize the crew inside in an instant with the residual energy.

"02, 02!"

"...Come to think of it, 02 was this guy's comrade’s ship, wasn't it?" Gazura muttered softly as he watched the young operator shout, ignoring what he had to say.

Normally, Gazura would never have assigned inexperienced people like them to his fleet.

Nevertheless, he had accepted them because the young operator beside him was the son of an old friend of Gazura's, meaning they were related by fate.

(Putting only this one on this ship was the right call.)

Gazura let out a sigh of relief, then shouted, "Hey!"

He slammed his fist hard against the young operator's seatback. The young operator flinched, stiffening as he looked toward Gazura.

"The fight ain't over yet!"

"But... but..."

"If both Shield Breakers had hit, we'd be dead meat. Thanks to them, you and I are still alive. So you know what we gotta do."

At Gazura's words, the young operator nodded with teary eyes.

"Captain! Enemy ship jump, long range!" Another operator called out from behind Gazura.

"What are our casualties?"

"Ten!"

"Good! Have the transport ship's boarding party recover the escapees, and the rest of us pursue them!"

A minute after he said that, Gazura and the others caught Kamidake's reaction and jumped.

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When Gazura’s fleet disappeared into hyperspace, the pirate ship carrying the boarding force had already begun retrieving the life pods of the crew who had escaped after the attack and investigating the transport. However, as Gazura had predicted, there was no one hiding inside the transport.

The inspection force withdrew, and the transport ship, receiving a signal from the pirate ship, jumped into hyperspace to escape.

"Captain, the inspection team has returned. All escape pods have been recovered."

"What about the cargo inside the containers?"

"It was torn apart by the impact. There seem to be some parts that remain, but..."

"Just to be safe. I'll use it as a target for artillery fire and then go after the main target."

"Roger."

At the captain's command, the operators opened fire on the container. But before they

could even confirm whether the two shots had hit their target, the pirate ship initiated a hyperspace jump. Then, in the now-empty space, something began to move. It was inside the anti-energy defense gel clinging to the underside of the container's outer wall, where the surface had melted slightly.

"Looks like the pirate ship jumped too. They sure are thorough."

Inside the cramped escape pod, NB, held by Hakuren, said while scanning the outside situation.

"Karen, everything okay over there?"

"Yes, all clear."

"Then we'll begin our operation."

Hakuren sprayed a liquid that degraded the gel, then launched the makeshift spacecraft. It was created by attaching the escape pod to the engine section of the delivery ship that the Kamidake-protected courier had arrived in. The gel lost its viscosity and hardness, crumbling away easily like soft jelly.

"Looks like it worked."

Before Hakuren and the others lay the 02 ship, which had been alongside the Gazura vessel.

"But the real trouble starts now. After all, this sector has a tangled web of complex territorial claims... Even the GP can't easily intervene here."

"So worst case, we'll have to escape under our own power. Let's hurry then."

"Roger that."

NB emerged from the escape pod and immediately headed for the connected weapons unit and began accessing the external inspection unit at the connection point.

"Just as I thought. The damage is contained thanks to the generator and adapter the pirates installed. The unit is intact."

"Roger. Karen, assist him."

Upon hearing NB's report, Hakuren exited the escape pod and headed toward the unit.

——Now, a little earlier.

After Kamidake purged the container's exterior, it took about five seconds for the pirates' cannon fire to destroy the small container with the transmitter. Ringo's team had perfectly seized that split-second opportunity. And that data was sent to Ryoko Balta almost in real time.

"Container transmitter confirmed! Kamidake's position identified."

On the bridge of that ship, Ryoko's First Officer and all the bridge crew aboard were assembled.

"Jurai's intelligence analysis is truly impressive."

With only sparse information from Pan Dora, Ringo had predicted several possible destinations for Kamidake's transport. The information just received confirmed their predictions were accurate.

"Still, a location where multiple nations' territorial space overlaps is troublesome. Moreover, this area is still a space zone with unclear sovereignty. This means Jurai's fleet can't move carelessly."

"That's why we were hired, right?"

"Is that all right?" The First Officer said, staring at Ryoko.

Her actions meant she would be put on the Guild's wanted list.

"Yes, of course." Ryoko flashed a smile that betrayed not a shred of regret or anxiety.

And it was a smile the entire crew, not just the First Officer, had been waiting for on the bridge and throughout the ship.

"Roger! All personnel, gather intelligence using every resource at your disposal. But do so without revealing our actions!"

"Roger!" The bridge crew nodded in unison.

"Then, little by little is fine—leak what happened this time to the Guild members."

"But wouldn't that put Kamidake in danger?"

"There is no doubt that the substance attached to Kamidake is interfering with communication and navigation. However, there is no information that any such development is being carried out at the Academy."

"So it was developed by the Guild? But..."

"As with Daidoros, it seems Tarrant secretly preserved the development team from when the Shank Guild held great power in the past. If that's the case..."

"So the team pursuing Kamidake is quite elite, huh. I see. Then it's better if a motley crew shows up and causes a melee, right?"

"It'll be easier to pinpoint Kamidake's location, and it'd be easier for us to infiltrate too. Kiriko-san and the others should be able to handle it."

At that moment, Ryoko was confident they could resolve things quickly. But their target was Yamada Seina, and things wouldn't go so smoothly.

"What? Tarrant!?"

"Yeah, he told me not to get involved."

In the dimly lit room, Nakita spoke with a voice-only contact. This contact belonged to a faction of military hawks within the upper echelons, and Nakita had been working with them for some time.

"He's definitely after Kamidake, right?"

"Considering the overall situation, there's no doubt about it."

"That bastard Tarrant... taking advantage of our leniency to do as he pleases!"

"Hmm... But what can we do? Right now, Yamada Seina and Tarrant aren't even worth weighing on a scale."

"At least from our perspective, that is."

No military officers accessing this channel had ties to Tarrant. Naturally, they'd judge Yamada Seina to be more important.

"But as long as he's in that sector, even the GP can't act recklessly, right? If that still isn't enough, we can mobilize the Galactic Federation Council!"

"Hmm... What are you getting at, Nakita-kun?"

"A delivery company ship was pursued and sunk by pirates. Afterwards, Kamidake rescued the escaped delivery personnel. Following verification of their identities, Kamidake also went missing."

"I see. Not a pleasant story... Do you know what the cargo was?"

"Unfortunately, no. However, it seems linked to Masaki Airi, and Jurai is involved."

"Kamidake was originally slated to be Jurai's next flagship. And Yamada Seina is the child The Demon Princess sent into space as a special exception."

"So the cargo from the contractor Kamidake contacted belongs to Jurai?"

"It's Tatsuki Ringo who's moving."

"The Demon Princess's accountant, the leader of the Hyena Corps?"

"Apparently it's a test for the next head of the intelligence department. If the Demon Princess was directly commanding it, it would have been impossible for us to detect it."

"Then all the more reason we can't intervene. But... I want information on what this is about. It might be a clue to understanding the power behind Tarrant."

"Still, that bastard has been making one blunder after another lately. I hear his influence within the Guild is waning too?"

"Hmph... If he lets Kamidake slip through his fingers now, it might be our chance to put a leash on him."

"Still, we can't let Tarrant catch wind of it. What do you say, Nakita?"

"Seeing how serious Jurai and Tarrant are will make the importance of that cargo clear. For now, have the Galactic Federation Council issue a warning to GP regarding this matter and elevated surveillance of Imperial Ships to level 2."

Imperial Ships were placed under Galactic Federation surveillance due to their combat capabilities. Specifically, Imperial Ships up to the third generation must report their navigation information in real-time except during first-class emergencies like war. And at level 2, they must be accompanied by surveillance vessels during their movements.

"Alright, I'll leave it to you."

The Kamidake repeatedly executed hyperspace jumps, continuing combat against the attacking pirate ships. True to their reputation as pirates selected for the Kamidake extermination mission, they had grown accustomed to fighting Kamidake, and almost none of their ships were sunk.

"The next test voyage was supposed to be an armament experiment...but then these guys showed up!" Beads of sweat glistened on Amane's forehead as she handled both the ship's steering and gunnery duties aboard the Kamidake.

"Captain. At present, there are no signs of follow-up ships jumping in."

"There are 55 enemy ships!"

"Isn't it about time they were done already!!?"

Even though this was far fewer ships than the massive fleet they'd encountered when Seina first joined them, their own vessel was in poor condition and the pressure from the enemy was on an entirely different scale. Alan and the others' voices were close to screams.

"Captain, the operational time for Hakuren and the others' life support systems has dropped below half."

"Leave this space and proceed to their location."

"Roger! I hope they're holding up okay."

Kamidake repeated random jumps and returned to the location where it had first been transported.

"Light signal confirmed! They're ready."

Receiving Hakuren and Karen’s light signal, Kamidake immediately approached the location of the armed unit they had prepared.

"We don't have time! Hurry!"

Kamidake had deliberately maneuvered the scattered pirate ships into one location to buy time for this unit's refit. NB remained behind for guidance while Hakuren and Karen towed the small boat recovered from the pirate ship they had linked units to, along with a small amount of supplies, back to Kamidake.

Gwoooon! With a dull rumbling vibration, the unit connected to Kamidake.

"Link complete, circuit connected."

Originally, this unit was one generation older than the docking weapon units used by the GP. When they were replaced with newer models, this one was diverted from its intended path to be dismantled and recycled. Since Kamidake was built to GP specifications, docking was straightforward.

Of Kamidake's six generators, two powered the main hull; two more activated, beginning to feed energy to the connected unit.

"Connection normal... Wait, what the hell is this!?" Kiriko couldn't help but exclaim.

The parameters for various systems—the unit's engine, weapons, communication systems, and more—were extremely unstable.

"What the hell? Not a single part's in decent shape. Looks like some kids used it for their games."

Only a handful within the Pirate Guild possessed high-performance ships like Ryoko Balta's original design. While the Guild naturally sought to bolster its forces by constructing various standard vessels, these weren't distributed freely. Fewer than thirty percent of members could afford them. Most pirates used ships cobbled together from used parts or junk. When it came to handling such junk, no one could match pirates. For them, their ships were their homes and their tools of the trade.

Space is a harsh environment where even minor accidents could mean the difference between life and death. Even though pirates prioritized speed and firepower, their foremost concern remained maintaining balance for emergencies like accidents or combat. Like ships that used units like those connected to Kamidake, the imbalance of forcing large combat units onto small hulls with adapters made them far too combat-specialized and ill-suited for piracy. Moreover, their poor maintenance made it obvious at a glance that they were used by inexperienced hands, drunk on their raw power and destructive force.

"I thought those guys from the fleet would be better, but I was wrong."

"Guess we'll just have to muddle through and make it work,"

Amane and Kiriko grumbled.

"Gravity fluctuations detected! Enemy jumping out!" Alan's voice, almost a scream, echoed through the bridge.

"Gyokuren and Suiren, operate your units!"

Playing around with a lightly armed transport ship was child's play, but facing a full-fledged combat fleet required extracting the units' maximum combat performance. Kiriko decided that to match Amane's advanced ship handling and firing skills, two specialists were needed.

"Alright! We'll annihilate them right here!"

At Amane's command, Kamidake accelerated sharply, launching a surprise attack on the fleet that had just jumped out.

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"The jump-out point is the initial combat zone!?"

Receiving the operator's report, Gazura frowned in puzzlement.

——Something was off.

Against a normal opponent, they would have simply pushed through with their momentum. But Kamidake's demonstrated capabilities and Gazura's experience sounded a small alarm.

"Captain, the 44th Guards Fleet has jumped directly into the target sector."

"What!?"

"Heh, either they lost patience or they're trying to score points... 'Don't interfere,' they said."

Only those selected as Guard members could board Tarrant's Daidoros. In reality, they were practically Tarrant's playmates, mostly young in age. The risk of dying in Tarrant's games or being killed for displeasing him was high, but their power was absolute.

Each Guard commander commanded a fleet of at least twenty, and up to a hundred, pirate ships from their flagship vessels. Each flagship commander had dozens of ships under their personal command, and fifty percent of the income from these ships was taxed and handed over.

The members of the Imperial Guard, who turned over frequently, were distinguished by numbers and were rarely called by name; coming to a place like this meant they were on the same level as the young captains of the subordinate units attached to the lead ship—that is, the crew of the ship equipped with that armed unit.

"Fifty people? That's a bit much, isn't it?"

"Boss, we need to hurry too!"

Fearing being beaten to it, the young operator stood up and looked at Gazura.

(Hmm... Perfect. Let them be the bait. Either way, staying here will only earn Tarrant's displeasure.)

Gazura raised his head and declared, "Alright! To save face for the 44th Guards Fleet, we'll jump in a scattered formation one minute later, at a slightly distant location!"

"What?!"

The young operator looked displeased, but the other operators understood Gazura's intent and nodded.

"What can we do if His Highness the Guard tells us 'Don't interfere'? For once, shove your comrades to the back of your mind and shut it."

"……"

The young operator trembled with frustration at Gazura's matter-of-fact words. But remembering this mission wasn't meant to sink Kamidake, he realized there was no way to avenge his comrades. He collapsed back into his seat. As if his moment of conflict were a signal, Gazura’s ship jumped into hyperspace.

"Wh-what is this!?"

What the young operator saw after the hyperspace jump was exactly the scene Gazura had feared.

"Just as I thought."

At that moment, the flagship of the 44th Guards Fleet suffered repeated secondary explosions, and a few seconds later, it exploded, taking two other ships—which had failed to evade—down with it.

"I wish those guys would join my crew..."

Kamidake's tactics were so masterful they could serve as a textbook example for fleet combat. Even if the enemy was foolish, charging a fleet of fifty ships alone was reckless. And yet...

"Ah, that's their ship's!?"

“Looks like the Shield Breaker wasn't just lost—it was intentional. And the cunning to gather us all in one space to buy time for their rearmament? I can't help but be impressed.”

"Damn it... What the hell?!" Gazura roughly grabbed the young operator's head as he gritted his teeth.

"And get this! For you guys to handle that unit—which were barely maintained and gave all sorts of weird quirks—so flawlessly like that... it'd be weird not to be impressed, right?"

"W-Well..." The young operator, too, was actually captivated by Kamidake's battle.

To toy with numerous fleets single-handedly was the very essence and aspiration of piracy. The battle unfolding before them was spectacular, like a staged drama.

"The battle-hardened Guards Fleet..."

"Battle-hardened? They're just used to taking down fleeing enemies with overwhelming force. That's not what you'd call experienced in battle... but their opponents were just too tough."

"Huh?"

"Shield Breakers require incredibly high-energy generators to operate. That unit is no exception."

For a Kamidake-class ship to use a Shield Breaker, it would take considerable time to charge the energy, and maintaining the shield would also require a significant amount of energy. Naturally, while the shield was charging, the ship would be restricted not only in combat but even in navigation, and it would be completely unable to engage in combat while the shield was being maintained.

But Kamidake fired the Shield Breaker normally while maintaining combat readiness. Likewise, to use that armed unit, they'd need to add a dedicated generator.

"The fact that they didn't have generator units attached means that ship definitely has a high-output generator installed..."

Gazura paused for a moment, then gave the young operator a light tap on the head.

"Hmph! I see. So the enemy's armaments can handle small ships, but breaking through large ships' shields and armor is difficult, huh? ...Alright! Concentrate fire on the weapon units! All ships, simultaneous fire!"

"But our sister ships aren't ready yet!"

"The moment they failed to protect the flagship of the Guards Fleet, they became targets for purging! In that case, it's better to report that they at least served some purpose! Fire!!"

Now that Kamidake had entered the fleet, its movement was restricted, presenting the perfect chance to attack the weapons unit. Scattering the fleet carelessly would only let Kamidake escape.

At Gazura’s signal, artillery fire began on Kamidake, but it seemed that the enemy had anticipated this as well, as Kamidake dodged the attacks from all directions.

"Their evasion speed is too fast!"

"Damn it, useless fools! Plug the holes! Just focus on hitting enemy units!"

Gazura's fleet's initial attack appeared concentrated, yet deliberately left gaps for their comrades to evade. Normally, the remaining escort fleet would have maneuvered to fill those gaps, joining the Gazura in attacking Kamidake. But not a single ship in the escort fleet realized this.

Under Gazura's orders, the gaps were closed and the assault intensified. Yet Kamidake skillfully maneuvered through the barrage. Worse still, they cleverly used the fleeing escort fleet as a shield.

"Please, stop!"

Overcome by guilt at attacking a sister ship, the young operator screamed. If they hadn't shut off communications from the other ship, they would have fled.

"Captain! I beg you, stop the attack..."

"Destroy the armed units while they're trapped in the cage!"

Ignoring the young operator's pleas, Gazura barked orders at his subordinates. Of course, the young operator didn't expect his words to be heeded, but he felt like his heart would break if he didn't say something.

"Ah... ah..."

Crouched down, covering his ears, the young operator wept.

"Direct hit on the unit!"

"Good! Finish them off!"

Right before Gazura's eyes, Kamidake broke through the Guards Fleet's encirclement and vanished into hyperspace.

"Damn! What are our losses?"

"005, 032, and 050 too."

"Same class as this ship! They came to crush us with large vessels, knowing our armed units would be useless. And in that situation! ... Damn, those bastards never go down without a fight. What about survivors from the 44th Guards Fleet?"

"Only two ships can navigate under their own power."

"Ugh!!"

Upon hearing the senior operator's report, the young operator suddenly covered his mouth and dashed to the bridge toilet.

"Well, that's refreshingly naive, isn't it?"

"What a troublesome guy,"

"But look at you grinning like an idiot,"

Only those with considerable experience were selected for Gazura's bridge crew. That's why it had been a long time since they'd seen a reaction like that young operator's. And since everyone had children the same age as that young operator, it was only natural that they all wore amused expressions.

"Heh. I was in the same class as his old man, and we both lost our virginity around the same time." Gazura chuckled nostalgically.

Just then, the ship shook slightly from an attack by a surviving ship of the Guards Fleet.

"Damn it! We're letting them off easy, and those fools still..."

"...How dare you... We're the Guards... I'll kill them! Kill..."

Amidst the static, the transmission could be heard, followed by repeated cannon fire directed at Gazura's ship.

"The 44th Guards Fleet is made up of recently recruited scum... Well, they're probably just like him."

The operator shrugged and glanced toward the restroom.

"If they'd just slipped away in the chaos, they might have survived... Stupid bastards."

The moment Gazura finished speaking, the 44th Guards Fleet was annihilated by a simultaneous barrage from his fleet.

"Why..."

"Hm?"

When Gazura turned around, the young operator was watching the final moments of the 44th Guards Fleet, standing at the entrance to the restroom with eyes brimming with tears.

"This is the raw truth in the field for the Shank organization. Well, the 44th Guards Fleet will probably be reselected and reformed tomorrow.

"……"

Listening to Gazura's words reminded the young operator of his father's advice.

His father knew the young operator longed to join Tarrant's personal guard. And when it was decided he would be assigned to Gazura's squad, his father had said to him:

——It'll be a good learning experience.

"Chief, the target's reaction... What the hell is this!?"

"What's going on!?"

As Gazura turned his attention back toward the main monitor, the relative positions of his fleet and Kamidake were displayed.

"Hey, what the hell is this jump distance!?"

The entire bridge crew stared at the monitor, speechless. And no wonder—Kamidake had just executed a jump over ten times longer than the previous record distance.

"The AHP wasn't removed, right?"

"...That unit."

A young operator's muttered voice came from behind Gazura, who was deep in thought.

"What do you mean?!"

"I see! The weapons unit's mass is suppressing the vibrations, Chief!" The operator shouted

Realizing the meaning of the young operator's words, the other operators turned towards Gazura.

"I see. Compared to that ship, the weapons unit is quite large. Damn! So that was their real target. Alright, split the fleet and pursue them. Prioritize destroying that unit above all else!"

"But splitting into two formations will make jump predictions harder?"

"If our numbers get any smaller, we'll be destroyed! Call in all the ships on standby! No more holding back!"

"Roger!"

"Hey! How long are you going to stand there spacing out!?" Gazura yelled at the young operator standing at the restroom entrance.

"Huh?"

"It could be us tomorrow. We're not special! Or do you want me to make that stall your seat?" Gazura pointed at the remains of the 44th Guards Fleet.

The young operator, realizing the meaning behind Gazura's words scrambled back to his own seat in a panic.

Chapter Five: Escape

Three days have passed since Kamidake was last seen.

The disguised container ship carrying Ryoko Balta had arrived at a fake satellite—about

thirty kilometers in diameter—used by the Da Ruma Guild pirates in the sector where Kamidake was located. The fake satellite was currently teeming with pirates intent on capturing Kamidake, and the disguised container ship had entered port yesterday fully loaded with supplies. Just as Ryoko had anticipated, the disguised satellite was suffering from a shortage of supplies due to the influx of pirates, and the goods she had brought sold like hotcakes. She was welcomed as a shrewd businesswoman, and after her supplies were completely sold out, this shrewd businesswoman remained on the disguised satellite openly, now as a pirate targeting Kamidake.

The disguised container ship provided by Airi looked like a used, near-scrap vessel on the outside, but inside it was a high-performance ship equipped with a Class A intelligence gathering system and an advanced repair dock for the Kamidake. However, on the bridge of that ship, Ryoko Balta watched the incoming information with a grim expression.

"This is troublesome."

To Ryoko's right, Airi appeared on the monitor, saying, "This is a problem, isn't it?"

And on the opposite side of Ryoko, Ringo, on another monitor, checked the information with a perplexed look.

“Since this is the ship Seina-sama is aboard, we dispatched personnel of appropriate caliber from our side as well... but I never imagined it would be this bad...”

"It's truly infuriating, isn't it?"

It was no wonder Ringo and Airi let out deep sighs. Ever since acquiring the weapons unit, Kamidake had consistently evaded Ryoko's... no, Gazura's predictions and kept slipping away.

"And what's more..."

Based on the information from the Da Ruma Guild's side, the number of pirate ships sunk after encountering the Kamidake had skyrocketed to laughable levels. This meant that while Ryoko and Gazura's predictions had been off, Seina's abilities were being fully demonstrated against the pirates who'd gathered out of sheer curiosity. This situation was also being broadcast on the fake satellite and had even become the subject of bets.

"Considering the circumstances when Seina-sama first entered space, it's only natural, I suppose... But as a single standard ships kill count, it's a record, Airi-sama."

"Their skill level is low, but it really is like moths flying into the flames, isn't it? Anyway, the Kamidake is a treasure trove of all kinds of data right now, so I want to somehow recover both Seina-kun and it safely."

"Does that mean you can deploy the GP or Jurai fleet?"

Ryoko, who had been listening to their conversation until then, asked the question she already knew the answer to, her tone tinged with irritation.

"Large-scale operations in that sector are impossible. Imperial Ships are currently under surveillance by the Galactic Federation."

"The GP can't touch that sector either. The GP military refused deployment through Principal Mikami right away... Either way, with things escalating this much..."

It was the military's roundabout warning to keep Airi and the others out of it too. That left only Ryoko and her crew to rely on.

"Then please consider this more seriously. No matter how capable Kiriko-san and the others are, they have physical limits. How long can Kamidake hold out?"

"I see. I'm sorry."

Ringo bowed her head obediently, but Airi looked away from Ryoko.

“Because he keeps proving me wrong every single time. It's just so frustrating!” Airi, red pencil tucked behind her ear and staring intently at the prediction sheet, looked like a bookie at the racetrack.

"Could you be a little more serious..."

"That said, I can understand how you feel, Airi-sama."

"!?"

“After all, not only are our forecasters’ wrong, but the Juraian and Academy joint team's predictions are consistently off the mark. They should definitely be in this sector, yet we can't detect their presence or make contact... It's like dealing with ghosts, pure occult territory.” The First Officer, who had been silent until then, said to Ryoko as if to calm her.

"...Yes. Thank you."

The atmosphere returned to normal, but no brilliant ideas emerged. In the end, they could only diligently repeat the work they'd been doing.

"If only... we had information from a different angle..." Ryoko murmured as she immersed herself in her work.

"Are you okay, Seina?"

"Huh? Oh... Sorry, Amane-san." Seina, his face pale with exhaustion, entered the captain's large bedroom leaning on Amane's shoulder.

"Even if you're less fatigued than the rest of the crew, going three days without any sleep is reckless."

"But..."

Kamidake's navigation instructions over the last three days involved testing various patterns. Kiriko and Hakuren meticulously predicted data, while Amane and Gyokuren used their instincts to select the best course. And in the end, Seina determined that the method where he made the final call was the best. While this pattern increased the encounter rate with opportunistic pirates, it completely avoided encounters with highly skilled Gazura pirates. Ironically, though Seina and his crew didn't realize it, this ability also evaded Ryoko and the others' predictions.

"First time in here, but it's a weird room. It's like..." Amane cut herself off mid-sentence.

The canopy bed, constructed entirely of timber framing and illuminated by indirect lighting in the dimly lit room, resembled an Earth apple when the privacy curtains were drawn. Its atmosphere was undeniably saturated with an aura designed to arouse desire.

"This has to be Airi-sama's design... Wait, whoa!!"

Distracted by the room's scene, Amane tripped over the edge of the bed and fell onto it with Seina.

"Seina, are you okay!?" She asked worriedly, but the overwhelming softness and comfort of the bed she'd fallen onto robbed Amane of any will to get up.

"Yes, I'm fine... Are you all right, Amane-san?" Seina propped himself up slightly and looked down at Amane as he spoke.

At that moment, "Ah..." Amane's cheeks flushed crimson as she met Seina's gaze, her heartbeat quickening.

Unlike Kiriko, Hakuren, and the other ladies-in-waiting, Amane hadn't received specialized training. Her instincts for shooting and ship handling weren't honed through training, but innate talent. In other words, her mental capabilities didn't match her physical performance. While manageable for short periods, maintaining the balance between mind and body became difficult under the constant tension of small-crew rotations and relentless pirate combat. Her body simply couldn't keep up with the high-level maneuvers her mind demanded.

Surprisingly, Seina became Amane's mental anchor. Amidst this constant tension, Seina remained perpetually composed and calm, sitting solidly in the captain's chair. His presence grew more pronounced with each passing moment. The stark contrast with Alan and the others, who began screaming within an hour, further highlighted Seina's uniqueness and dependability. It was a moment that made one realize just how much his probability bias had forged Seina's mental fortitude.

And it wasn't just Amane who found Seina a pillar of support. Kiriko and Hakuren, too, sought his guidance when nerves frayed from prolonged fatigue. Even if it was merely repeating a suggestion, the moment Seina spoke, calm returned to the bridge.

"Seina..."

Amane's feelings for Seina were originally purely protective. But as the sense of being supported by him and her competitive spirit with Kiriko and the other girls weighed on her mind, she began to lean towards a faint crush. The uncertain future, the atmosphere in this room, and the slight chance of being looked down at by a member of the opposite sex all flipped a switch in her mind.

"Ah, Amane-san?" Seina felt every hair on his body stand on end at Amane's change.

Seina reflexively tried to flee, but this wasn't just a localized change in Amane—it was something far more profound, something that had transformed the very air in the room.

Prey dragged into a den—that was the perfect description. A sweet ecstasy that was akin to despair left Seina unable to move, as if paralyzed. Amane's true nature, the one that made Gyokuren call her a "demon," was fully revealed, her usual manly demeanor vanished, and what was more, she also possessed extraordinary beauty, making any means or point of resistance vanish. No matter how much he had been trained by his probability bias, Seina was not at all accustomed to the trouble (?) of being shown this kind of affection.

"Hey, Seina... one last thing..."

That husky voice, thick with emotion, shook Seina's soul like a spoken spell.

Amane's hand slowly reached out toward Seina, attempting to grasp his hand. Seina's groin felt like it would burst, hard as a rock, ready to explode at the slightest touch from Amane's hand, but

"Last thing... What?!"

Just as Amane's hand was about to touch Seina, Kiriko's voice rang out from directly behind him.

"Dammit, Kiriko!"

Instantly, Amane's aura returned to normal, and the atmosphere in the room settled down. Had Amane been even a fraction more serious about Seina, Kiriko's presence alone might not have been enough to stop her. But at this moment, Kiriko's interruption carried just enough authority to flip her switch off.

"Don't waste your energy on nonsense during an emergency!"

Seina, freed from his paralysis, quickly sat down on the bed, keeping some distance from the battle zone between Amane and Kiriko, and covered his lower body with the blanket.

"Kiriko, what exactly are you doing in Seina's bedroom?"

"Seina-chan, here, take this."

Ignoring Amane's words, Kiriko handed Seina a one-liter water bottle.

"Ugh, does that mean..." Realizing what might be inside the bottle, Amane grimaced.

"Just think of it as medicine and endure it. Even if you don't use as much stamina as the other crew members, collapsing won't do us any good."

The water bottle Kiriko handed over contained a solution of algae powder dissolved in water. This algae powder enabled the body to synthesize essential vitamins and minerals. It thrived on minimal light and human waste, and its portable, compact cultivation tank made it standard emergency equipment on every ship. However, despite its convenience, its terrible taste earned it the worst reputation among the crew. Of course, there were plants capable of producing more decent food, but they required significant space and, due to the Kamidake's primary purpose, weren't installed.

"But doesn't Seina get better rations!?"

Even when dividing the limited rations, they weren't distributed equally among all crew members, but rather allocated according to each department's workload. Normally, the captain should have been prioritized for a decent meal.

"What's going on, Kiriko!?"

"It's fine. I'm the one who suggested it. I'm just the captain for convenience, handling navigation." Seina said to Amane with a cheerful smile.

Amane was glaring at Kiriko with a hardened expression, then began drinking a beverage that tasted like dried wood shavings mixed with green juice.

"Seina... are you okay?" Amane grimaced violently, as if the memory of tasting it during her trainee days had flashed back.

"You get used to it. It's actually pretty good. Kind of like a tea with an unusual flavor."

"R-Really?"

"Come on, Amane, go back to your room and rest."

“Got it... See ya, Seina.” Amane was completely disarmed by Seina's comment about the drink. She waved lightly and obediently disappeared toward the entrance.

At that very moment, Kiriko's legs gave way, and she slumped down onto the edge of the bed.

"Ki-Kiriko-san!" Seina rushed over in alarm, but his momentum halted completely upon seeing Kiriko's expression.

"Seina-chan..."

The languid look she gave Seina resembled the demonic state Amane had been in earlier.

Though she'd undergone special training and had more tolerance for this situation than Amane, the extraordinary aura Amane had been radiating earlier had flipped Kiriko's switch too.

(It's okay now. I don't have to hold back anymore.) Facing a situation with no clear end in sight, one where death was a very real possibility, Kiriko felt something sweet, even pleasurable.

"...Kiriko-san?"

Kiriko's expression as she slowly approached was that of a woman in heat. While it was nowhere near as crazy as Amane's, it was the very expression Seina had longed for all this time.

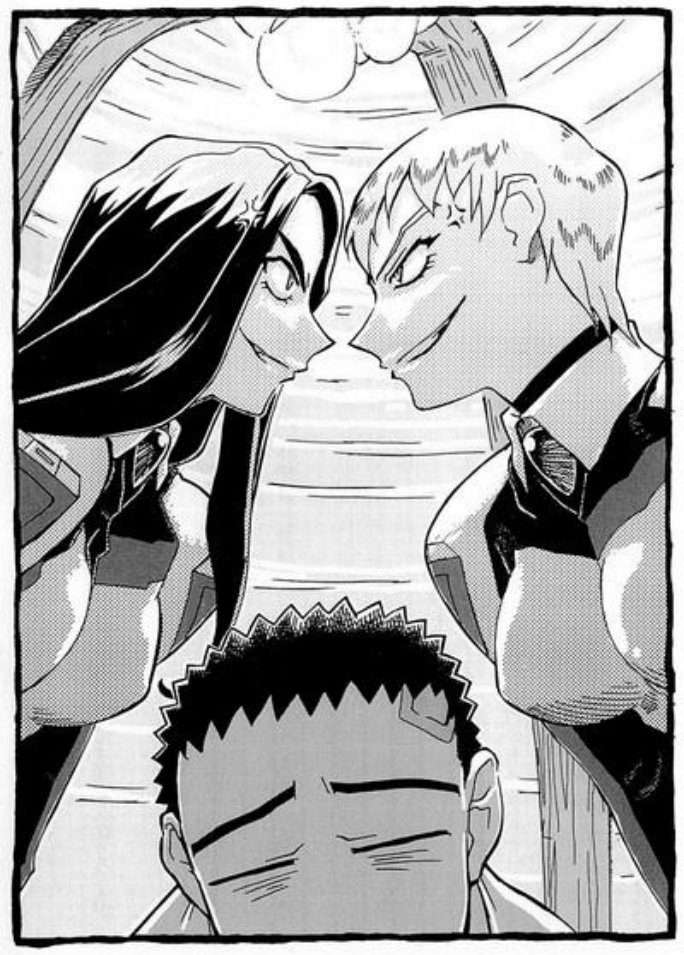
——He wanted to dive straight into the expression Kiriko was showing.

Ironically, however, the depths of Seina's hardened spirit refused to yield to this situation. Unconsciously recognizing that now was the time to recover his strength, Seina dodged Kiriko's approaching hand and swiftly put distance between them.

"Seina-chan?" Surprised by Seina's rejection, Kiriko assumed it was an act born of shyness and moved closer to Seina.

"It's okay... come on." Kiriko smiled brightly, moistening her lips seductively with her tongue.

But at that moment, "Hey, no way! That's not fair, Kiriko!" Amane, who was supposed to have left the room, suddenly burst into the room with the force of a dump truck crashing into a house.



"Who's being sneaky here?! Pretending to leave like that..." Even Kiriko, who usually admitted her faults quickly, wouldn't budge today.

——She could accept Amane's feelings for Seina.

——But she didn't want her to take it any further.

Kiriko, burdened by guilt for once running away from Seina, felt uneasy about her bond with him. That's why she was filled with dread at the overwhelming, violent, dazzling beauty of Amane she'd just witnessed.

Convinced that even the slightest closeness to Seina was dangerous, Kiriko pressed forward toward Amane. The two glared at each other, their faces almost touching. That said,

Kiriko's face, now fully in control of her senses, was bright red with shame at her own boldness.

"Um..."

With his stomach finally full and overcome by intense sleepiness from exhaustion, Seina surrendered to his body's desire for sleep, as if escaping the great monster battle unfolding before him.

"Seina-chan!?"

"Seina!!"

Noticing Seina collapsed on the bed, Kiriko and Amane scrambled to climb onto it. But NB stepped in front of them, holding them back.

"Don't worry, he's just tired and fell asleep."

"But!"

"More importantly, Kiriko-san, you should head to the bridge soon. Those three idiots are screaming their heads off."

"Dammit! It hasn't even been an hour since my shift started..."

"Kiriko-san and the others aren't exactly normal... but yeah, they are sloppy."

"Hang in there, Kiriko."

With Amane watching her go, Kiriko quickly tried to leave the room. After taking two or three steps, she rushed back and grabbed Amane by the collar.

"Amane, you go rest in your own room right now."

"Tch! You noticed, huh?"

"NB, I'm counting on you for the rest!"

Dragging the struggling Amane behind her, Kiriko left the bedroom.

"She's full of energy, no matter what she says... but still..."

After seeing Kiriko and Amane off, NB transformed into Kirche and covered Seina with a blanket.

"...But if things stay like this…" Kirche stared intently at Seina's sleeping face, deep in thought.

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Kiriko tossed the complaining Amane into her room and hurried toward the bridge.

"Honestly, Amane! Could you please not waste my energy at a time like this?!"

"Oh dear, you seem to be in a foul mood."

"Yikes!!?"

Whether it was Kiriko's excitement or Gyokuren's deliberate act, Gyokuren stood smiling behind Kiriko.

"Gyokuren!?... Seriously, stop scaring me like that."

"From the looks of things, it seems you've had a little showdown with Amane-sama over Seina-sama, huh?"

When it came to romantic entanglements, Gyokuren's insight was god-tier. That insight had driven countless couples to ruin over the years, but...

"……" Kiriko began to walk away.

"Heh, Seina-sama has his hands full, doesn't he?"

"……"

Gyokuren's fleeting glance seemed to tell Kiriko not to cause trouble for Seina.

"I understand how you feel about Amane-sama. Your true nature is leaking out under these circumstances too."

"Alright, I surrender. ...I never expected you to be the one to call me out. Still, what kind of change of heart is this? For us, it saves us the trouble of worrying about it."

"Being with Seina-sama... that is what makes me happy." Gyokuren's smiling expression was like that of a saint, radiating an aura of purity that would have been utterly impossible for her former self. Combined with her extraordinary beauty, it was enough to inspire reverence.

"How dare you utter such embarrassing words...? And what makes it even more infuriating is how incredibly well they suit you. If this were the old you, I wouldn't hesitate to crush you!" As if to rally her resolve against the urge to surrender to Gyokuren's appearance, Kiriko raised her voice and clenched her fists tightly.

"Hehe, we need to do something about this situation so that doesn't happen."

"Is that why Hakuren and the others are being so quiet?"

"Extra trouble is mentally and physically draining. Worst case, if we surrender to the pirates, we'll have to wipe out the enemy ourselves."

"That's right."

To escape this situation, the worst-case plan was to surrender to a suitable pirate crew, then use Hakuren's teams strength to seize control of their ship. This prioritized the safety of the crew and Seto's cargo, though it meant abandoning Kamidake.

"A single-ship encounter, time to spare... Under these circumstances, encountering a pirate ship that meets our conditions is nearly impossible, though."

"Since Airi-sama must surely have some countermeasure prepared, we have no choice but to try to maintain this situation."

"Heh, if we abandon Kamidake, who knows what Airi-sama will say to us."

The two sat down in their seats on the bridge, sharing a wry smile.

The moment Kiriko and Gyokuren's seats appeared on the bridge, Alan and his team lowered theirs as if fleeing.

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Alan burst into his room and began shouting in frustration. He resembled the desperate gasping of a person thrown into water, gasping for air.

"This is no joke! No way, no way, no way, no way, no way, no way, no way! Why? Why do we have to go through this?!"

After shouting all that in one breath, he took a deep breath and looked at Barry and Cohen.

"You think so too, right? No matter how much debt we have, life comes first. Do they really think they can buy our lives with such a pittance of debt?!"

"But still... what can we do now?"

"We work and risk our lives, and are we expected to put up with this kind of treatment?" Alan said as he thrust the water bottle filled with that drink toward Barry and Cohen.

"But... we're the ones who caused it..."

"Besides, everyone's going to have to drink this from now on, right?"

"Is there any guarantee the contents are the same?"

"Huh!? What do you mean?"

“They're making us put up with this crap while the others might be eating proper meals. Think about it. Why can they handle tougher missions than us for longer hours? Isn't it because they get more rest than us? What do you need to take long breaks when food is scarce?”

"Because they're eating proper food!?"

"Exactly! There's no other explanation!"

"But they say Hakuren-san and the others have undergone more advanced training than us..."

"Even so, it's still abnormal. There's a physical difference between men and women."

"Yeah, that must be it, Barry!" Cohen, the glutton, was easily swayed by food-related arguments. He swallowed Alan's theory whole in an instant.

"Hmm... But what are we supposed to do? We don't have any concrete proof that our diets are different... Plus, we're the lowest-ranking members, we've got debts, and we don't even know about the food..."

"Ugh, true..."

"Hold on! Sure, we ate a bit more than usual, but if they'd loaded more food onto the ship, it wouldn't have been a problem! Even though it's a ship with that captain on board, they have no crisis management!"

Alan was the type who couldn't do anything alone. It was only because Barry and Cohen were there that he could be so bold.

"That might be true... But either way, I don't think we have much left in the reserves..."

"Got any concrete ideas?"

"Negotiate with the pirates."

"What!?"

"Shh! This conversation could be monitored too." Alan covered the mouths of the two who had shouted. Then, waiting until they calmed down, he slowly removed his hands.

"Ah, ah... Are you serious?"

"Do you really think we can outrun pirates in this situation? It's obvious we'll just keep losing ground until they catch us, right?" Alan leaned closer to them and said in a low voice.

"True, but will it work?"

"They're chasing us this desperately. It must be something incredibly important."

"You mean that package!?... But that's definitely treason, right?"

"It's not treason, it's helping someone. If we negotiate for Kamidake's release, we'll be his lifesavers."

"I see."

"Of course, once we hand over that package, we can't go back to the GP... But hey, if it comes to that, we'll be free of debt. We can take a hefty reward from the pirates and live on some random planet outside the Federation." Alan's expression grew increasingly smug. His

signature delusional fantasy was exploding.

"Way to go, Alan."

"That's not all. If, by some chance, the pirates don't give up on the captain..."

"If they don't give up?"

"It'd be a shame for the captain, but we could save the girls. Then we'd take custody of them..."

"The plan we discussed?"

That was the plan to promote Gyokuren and the others as idols.

"That's it!"

"Way to go, Alan."

"But how are we gonna get the package? How are we gonna contact the pirates?"

"……Oh!"

Barry's pointed remark left Alan frozen, his mouth hanging open. Alan was all fantasy and no concrete action.

"Hey, didn't you think about the most important part?"

"W-well..."

"Then leave it to me."

"Huh? NB!?"

Before they knew it, NB had joined Alan’s crew in their huddle. Before Alan and the others could react, NB pressed on.

"I can handle the package and contact the pirates. That's right, Alan."

"Huh... Oh, yeah, that's right!" To protect his position, Alan accepted NB's offer without pausing to consider its meaning or intent.

"Impressive. You've already won NB over to your side?"

"That's Alan for you!"

"Ha ha ha. I never miss a beat, ha~ ha ha ha ha!"

——About three hours later.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!" Alan and his crew were surrounded by hostesses in Gazura's ship's reception room. It felt exactly like a nouveau riche guy splurging at a high-end bar.

"Well? See? My words were spot on, weren't they?" Alan, in high spirits, wrapped an arm around the waist of the woman next to him and bit into a thick slice of steak offered by another woman with a fork.

"Still, I never thought it would go this smoothly."

"All thanks to NB."

"That's not right, Barry. NB is just a tool. This plan succeeded entirely because of this brain of mine! Haaaaa... Ha ha ha!!"

Alan and his crew, aided by NB, seized the package stored in the captain's quarters and escaped Kamidake in the small boat they'd brought when retrieving the pirate's armed unit. They decided to make Gazura their trading partner—the one who knew the cargo's value best. Though, to be fair, all of that had been NB's idea...

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"Hmph! How arrogant."

The young operator monitoring Alan's group from the bridge spat out. His eyes held a mix of hatred and contempt, not because Alan's group were the enemies who killed his friends, but because they had betrayed their comrades to come here.

——So, what are the terms?

——Our safety and money. And letting Kamidake go, I suppose?

——Safety and money, we can guarantee. But Kamidake is difficult.

——I knew you'd say that. The truth is, Kamidake is pretty desperate right now because of a lack of food.

——Oh? So that's your doing too.

——We figured you'd like that. So, one of our conditions is that you leave the handling of Kamidake's women to us. As for Yamada Seina, you can do whatever you want with him.

——Hmph... Fine, I suppose.

The young operator replayed the recorded conversation and stopped it with irritation.

Alan and his crew didn't just take the package; they bragged about the food shortage crisis on Kamidake as their own achievement and used it as a bargaining chip. To the young operator, this was utterly despicable. But what he hated most was the way they seemed to be looking at him.

The young operator survived only because he'd been specially transferred from his friends' ship to Gazura's vessel. And he'd exploited his comrades' personal guard fleet for his own ends. Of course, it wasn't the young operator's choice, but he admired Tarrant's personal guard. If he tried to join them, sooner or later, the time might come when he'd do the same thing of his own volition.

(Will I become like that? No, must I become like that?)

At least for now, the young operator found Alan's crew utterly repulsive. But he feared that feeling might fade someday.

"The Academy's newest test ship sure had some strange crew members aboard," A senior operator said, trying to cool the young operator's irritation.

"Huh!? Oh, right. They have massive debts from personally misappropriating Ryoko Balta Fan Club dues, so that seems to be why they became Kamidake crew members. Though apparently they were just token crew members to meet internal regulations."

"Well, looking at Yamada Seina's track record so far, it's no wonder no one else wanted the job. But then again, it's precisely because they're that kind of people they can pull off something like that."

"...I suppose so."

"But thanks to those kinds of people, we might be able to avoid further damage, so don't dwell on it too much."

"...Avoid further damage, you say?"

"If that package is genuine, that is."

Just as the senior operator said that, Gazura entered the reception room.

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The moment Gazura entered the reception room, he signaled to the hostesses. Instantly, they stepped back from Alan and the others, staring at them expressionlessly.

"Huh? What's up with them? They don't need to be so intimidated just because the captain walked in, do they?" Alan, too caught up in his excitement to read the room, remarked in a carefree tone.

But as the women continued to stare at them expressionlessly, he gradually began to understand why they had distanced themselves.

"...Ah, um..."

"About this package... it's fake."

Even Gazura hadn't been told any specifics about the package they'd been pursuing. The

reason it took time to determine its authenticity was because they'd had to unseal the shielded packaging just enough to use their inspection equipment without revealing the contents, then get direct confirmation from Tarrant.

"Oh, come now. Ha ha ha..."

At Alan's words, Gazura casually tossed the package aside. Alan nearly dropped it but grabbed hold, then ripped the packaging open violently. Inside lay what was commonly referred to as an "adult toy."

"……This is… the package for Seto-sama?" Alan and the others stared at the object with an indescribable expression.

Even if the contents were said to be fake, depending on how one interpreted it, claiming this was a package for Seto wouldn't be unnatural. And if pirates were pursuing Seto's weakness, it wasn't entirely implausible.

"Well, that was difficult to judge in many ways, wasn't it?"

Watching Alan and the others' reactions, Gazura fought back the urge to laugh while pondering the motives behind their actions.

(If they'd just fallen for the fake, that'd be fine... But what if they'd anticipated this and set something up?) Gazura pondered.

"Captain Gazura... Hey, how about using us as hostages for negotiations? We're indispensable to that ship, and Yamada Seina is someone we've taken quite good care of, heh heh heh." Alan, completely changing his earlier attitude, crouched low and spoke to Gazura in a servile tone.

"Like you lot have any value."

Gazura had seen all kinds of people in his experience. While Alan and the others' reaction in this situation wasn't particularly unusual, this type who felt not a shred of guilt over their actions and only sought self-preservation was dangerous—the kind who would betray anyone without hesitation. Disposing of them once they were no longer useful was best. They were the lowest-ranking type of person in Gazura's estimation.

"Escaped prisoners aren't useful as hostages, and negotiations are handled by specialists, both on our side and the GP's."

"Just talking is fine! They'll definitely come around!!"

"Pfft! If he's that naive, he'd have proper support, wouldn't he? Besides, we can't even communicate with them through hyperspace."

"Whoa, we never meant to escape! That NB guy..." Alan pointed at NB with a voice bordering on a scream, his grim expression suddenly shifting. He grabbed NB firmly and thrust him toward Gazura.

"That's right! I've got another souvenir for Captain Gazura. This guy! This is Yamada Seina's NB, and it's a special model crafted in the workshop of Masaki Airi, that Academy Chairman and philosopher!"

"What?!" Gazura's expression changed instantly.

"Hehehehe... What do you think? I reckon this one's got some serious value, don't you?" Alan misread Gazura's reaction, thinking he was shocked by the NB's value.

But Gazura's reaction was actually caution toward NB.

(So that's it... These guys brought something outrageous!)

When allowing Alan and his crew aboard his ship, NB had also undergone meticulous checks. The result was a determination that it posed no danger. But if it was something created by the infamous Masaki Airi, that was a different story. There was no telling what kind of outrageous capabilities it might possess.

(If this charade aims to destroy my ship or eliminate the crew, it makes sense. This reception room is a heavily armored shell compartment, but there's no absolute guarantee. I have no choice but to...)

Gazura looked at the subordinates surrounding Alan and the others.

(I feel sorry for those guys.)

"...I don't have the functions the captain thinks I do, so relax." As if reading Gazura's thoughts, NB said in a calm tone.

"What did you say?"

"Hey! We're in the middle of important negotiations, so you shut up! Ah, no—this one has some peculiar software installed. It occasionally blurts out strange things. Well, that's just a side effect of its high functionality..."

"I want to talk with the Captain alone. Have the others step out."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?! Hehehe, sorry about that. I'll make him be quiet right away."

"Fine. Leave that NB here. Throw these guys into the second reception room or something."

"W-wait, but we still have things to discuss!"

Gazura glared at Alan as if he were nothing but a nuisance.

“Eeek!!”

Alan, frozen like a frog stared down by a snake, and Barry and Cohen, trembling behind the sofa, were practically dragged out by the women.

"Phew..."

Once the women were completely outside and the partition door closed, Gazura let out a deep sigh of relief.

"You really care about your subordinates, huh?"

"How could I have let someone like you onto the ship? Could this be Yamada Seina's doing too?"

"Guess we're not the only ones tired."

"Tired? We've worked under worse conditions... Wait, maybe you're right. Taking that paint shell and making it this far... This is the first time we've ever been tossed around like that. So, what's this about? You want to make a deal or something?"

"First, let me present my... no, my conditions. I'm about to transform, but I won't harm you, so please don't shoot." As NB's voice shifted to Kirche's, NB's body began to transform.

"Wh-what!?"

Watching the figure transform seductively right before his eyes, Gazura felt an unbecoming tension for his age, his heartbeat quickening. Yet the sight before him was so captivating and beautiful it could be aptly described as the Birth of Venus.

The transformed Kirche smiled warmly at Gazura.

"...You... Where have I seen you before?" Gazura murmured

"Kirche!" Exclaimed the young operator.

Planet Jurai's Great Ocean——The single vast sea covering roughly sixty percent of Planet Jurai. In the waters near its center lay a cluster of military maritime city blocks, an area equivalent to half of Earth's Australia. The central block was modeled after the bridge of an Imperial Ship. At its heart stood a tree over a kilometer tall, the symbol of this maritime city.

——Myaaaaan.

From the observation deck at the very top of that symbolic tree, Seto and a middle-aged man watched Ryo-Ohki vanish into the twilight sky.

"I never imagined I'd see the legendary pirate ship with my own eyes. And to think it had such an adorable appearance."

"You made quite the grandpa, didn't you? ♡"

"Oh no, no. That child's cuteness was quite something too, and your subordinates were completely charmed. I imagine there are many down below crying as they see her off?"

"This should boost the marriage rate, ho ho ho ho."

From the conversation, they seemed like a friendly pair at first glance, but there was a sharp undertone to their words.

"Don't you have any lively young ones at your place?"

"You mean like the young ladies at Seto-sama's place? Well, these days, there aren't any such daredevils... After all, someone's already knocked the edge off them."

"Oh, that's a misunderstanding, I assure you. My girls are all exceptionally well-mannered young ladies."

"Hmm... I hear progress has been made with a man more to your liking than any of my own?"

"Yes. I expect it will be settled within a day or two. Once that happens, you'll be able to meet her too."

"I never imagined we'd meet so soon."

The sharpness vanished from the man's tone, and Seto's expression softened.

"Looking forward to it, aren't you?"

"And the fate of this world too."

The man looked up at the sky where Ryo-Ohki had disappeared and smiled.

“It’s Kirche!” The young operator's voice was filled with joy mixed with surprise and excitement. It was the same kind of reaction an idol fan would give.

"Kirche? ...Oh!"

The young operator's words triggered a memory in Gazura about the woman before him.

Even though Kirche was a famous idol at the Academy, when considering the entire Galactic Federation, she was essentially just a minor local idol. The vast majority of people didn't know her. Gazura, who clearly didn't seem like someone knowledgeable about idols, knew Kirche's name and face because it was rare for an AI to possess an Astral at all, and there was no other example besides Kirche of one becoming a top-level idol.

"...Is she real?"

Even if the memory matched, the woman before him wasn't necessarily Kirche herself.

"Wait a moment..."

Half-ignoring the young operator's voice, Gazura appraised Kirche with a gaze that would have frightened any ordinary young woman. Kirche, however, returned his stare calmly.

Kirche was still a CG idol without a physical body. If she were a physical entity, obtaining her personal data would be difficult, and the risk of that data leaking externally would be low. However, Kirche was data from the start, and her idol activities existed because Kirche manipulated that data. This made her highly susceptible to data copying at broadcast stations, and indeed, several incidents of Kirche's data leakage had occurred. Consequently, Kirche's portrait rights were strictly protected. Beyond video data such as program recordings, direct playback of her appearance personal data was illegal even for private use unless under Kirche's own control.

Furthermore, altering her appearance data within certain numerical ranges—meaning even look-alikes—could be illegal depending on the degree. Naturally, software to detect this was publicly available. They should have been verifying that on the bridge.

(Hmph! Even if she's a fake, she's definitely not just some AI.)

The woman before Gazura possessed the intense charm of the genuine article.

"...Data similarity rate: 100%. Appearance data appears to be original!"

"Kirche was listed as missing, right?"

"Yes."

"Whoa... Seriously?"

"My kid was a fan of Kirche's morning show. Watching it together, I started thinking she was pretty great too. My wife said she was cute as well."

"Me too."

"This is crazy. It's my first time seeing a real idol up close like this."

On the bridge, every operator and bridge crew member was glued to the main monitor.

"You guys, shut up for a sec! Dammit... Looks like everything's lined up. So I guess we can confirm she's the real deal..."

Gazura’s stern expression, contrasting sharply with the bridge's excitement, stemmed from Kirche having beaten them to the punch. The higher Kirche's value, the more likely the facts they were about to confirm would only make the situation more troublesome.

"...So, how about you tell us your real purpose now? You wouldn't have tagged along with those guys for no reason, right?"

"To inform you of Kamidake's situation. Your attack has made long-distance communication impossible."

"Got it! Track down the communication route and cut it off!"

"Roger!"

Amid Gazura's roar, the frantic clatter of checks echoed, and the relaxed bridge atmosphere tightened with tension.

"Young lady... you're quite the negotiator, aren't you? If we recognize your value first, we'll hesitate to destroy you."

Without knowing NB's value, there'd be no hesitation to eliminate a dangerous element. But knowing it held high value made one willing to take some risk.

"Still, what I don't get is why you'd go out of your way to help those guys?"

"That's because I made it seem that way."

"Those guys were bound to do something sooner or later... Ah, I see. So you were trying to isolate the troublemakers and let us know what was going on with the ship. So wouldn't it be better to just get rid of them?"

At Gazura's words, Kirche stared down intently, deep in thought—but, "...If I did that... it would cause the captain pain." She murmured softly.

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"...If you did that...the captain would suffer."

The young operator's hand froze completely upon hearing Kirche's words, his eyes fixed on her as if he'd forgotten to blink.

"Dammit! How are they communicating...? What about you over there?"

The bridge was struggling to pinpoint Kirche's communication route.

"No good. From long-range to short-range, there's no sign any route has been used."

“Maybe it's a bluff. Hey rookie! What about you?"

"Huh!?... Ah, no, nothing here either." The young operator answered his senior colleague's question, though he vaguely understood which route Kirche was using to communicate with the outside world.

(Probably from my personal PC...)

When he was assigned to the Gazura ship, he was given an unused small storage room as his quarters. It was a room with no power supply and no subspace terminal for computer connections. After much trial and error, he accidentally discovered a terminal connecting Gazura’s ship to the outside through an inspection hatch. It was unclear whether it was a spare or something else entirely. It was an unusual terminal that didn't appear to be in use, and what was more, it seemed inaccessible even from the bridge.

He'd connected his own PC to it, thinking he could just disconnect if told to stop—a rather casual attitude. But since that terminal offered a connection far more comfortable than the

ship's priority lines, he'd been secretly using it all this time.

Keeping the communication route secret wasn't because he'd been swayed by Kirche's concern for her comrades. He simply wanted to ease, even just a little, the guilt he felt for being the one among his friends who survived thanks to preferential treatment, and for being involved in the annihilation of his comrades' fleet... That was his thought. Of course, he also didn't want anyone to find out he'd connected his PC to some mysterious terminal without permission. But anyway, when it came to his favorite idol, he just wanted to look cool by doing something for free.

(...Huh?) The young operator, staring intently at Kirche, noticed something at that moment.

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"It’s no good. I can't find any transmission records anywhere."

Gazura was weighing Kirche's value based on the operator's report, but no matter what situation he put on one side of the scale, Kirche remained at the lower end and didn't budge.

"Even if the GP knew about this place, there's no way they could act quickly."

"Especially if they need to deploy a large fleet. That's even less likely." Kirche added, as if to supplement and agree with Gazura's self-justifying mutterings.

"Besides, there's no way the GP could launch a large-scale fleet operation here... But an Imperial Ship could, even a single one..."

"An Imperial Ship especially couldn't come here. If discovered, it would be seen as an act of aggression, potentially leading to the collapse of the Galactic Federation itself."

Imperial Ships were like nuclear weapons to each nation. With the number Jurai possessed, even Seniwa couldn't possibly oppose them. But inherently, Imperial Ships with their own will disliked fighting. So even if Jurai wanted to dominate the galaxy, the ships wouldn't consent to that. And before that, the Imperial Ship's Master would never force such a thing upon the Royal Trees. Nevertheless, since other nations inevitably viewed Imperial Ships solely as weapons, Jurai had declared that their operation was strictly limited to defense, to avoid arousing suspicion among other countries.

"Besides, even if you know the situation, you still have an advantage. The ones who will actually be coming here will be a small disguised recovery force from the GP... No, the Academy."

"I see. Well, that's probably about right."

Gazura noticed Kirche's provocative expression. In other words, she was saying: Want to bet whether Gazura gets there first, or the Academy, or perhaps other pirates?

Gazura was grateful for the proposal. Although Gazura himself denied it, the mission of capturing the Kamidake, which was difficult even to sink, was mentally exhausting not only

for the crew but also for the experienced Gazura. Considering his carelessness in welcoming the NB, it could be said that this was a more serious problem than he had anticipated.

(The commotion over there has died down, and Tarrant will be arriving soon. We don't have much time... so this is a good time to tighten the reins on the crew and get them focused. Besides, I wouldn't be able to do this without this bonus.)

Thinking this, Gazura was about to call out to Kirche when...

“Ahhh!”

"What? What's wrong!?"

"Kirche's outer armor material! It's the same bio metal used on that AV bioroid actress we saw last time!"

"Huh!?"

Gazing up in surprise at the ceiling camera, beyond Gazura, Kirche's cheeks flushed crimson with embarrassment.

"You think so too? But I heard that bio metal consumes an insane amount of energy just to maintain its form?"

"There's a verification filter. It's definitely that."

"Are you talking about that one we had a screening of the other day? You said it was cutting edge technology footage."

"Is it the one where you actually see it and it turns out to be an adult video? It's true, they do look alike in that sexy way."

"Too bad the acting was kinda lame, though."

"Guys, do you know how tall that actress is? Twelve meters twenty-two centimeters! Twelve meters twenty-two!"

"They built in an energy generator just to achieve that height, right? They made everything—special giant sets, bio-android male actors, other actresses—tailored to her height, so the production costs were on par with a major blockbuster. But no matter how much money they spent, the actress herself was a total dud."

The bridge crew, as if completely forgetting their current situation, started discussing dirty jokes. Kirche, listening to them, was completely flushed and kept her head down.

(Relaxing is fine, but they're getting way too loose, those idiots!)

But the one feeling even more unbearable discomfort was Gazura, facing Kirche. Kirche, who had just been boldly negotiating with Gazura moments ago, had completely changed her expression. She now looked like a typical young woman, blushing and looking down in

embarrassment. The sight was painful to watch, especially since the ones engaging in dirty talk in front of a woman who could be his own daughter were his own subordinates.

"How long are you going to keep spouting this worthless nonsense, you idiots?!" Gazura bellowed at the top of his lungs as if to shake off the guilt and the shame of having acknowledged Kirche as an equal opponent.

——Clatter!

Instantly, the sounds of bridge personnel scrambling back to their stations could be heard, followed by the chaotic murmur of everyone resuming their tasks.

"Sorry about that. I guess they got carried away meeting a real idol like you."

"...Ah, no, please don't mind me." Though her cheeks were still slightly flushed, her composed smile radiated an almost halo-like aura.

"For now, I'll accept your suggestion. It's not exactly an apology, but you should watch who wins from the bridge's VIP seats."

As Kirche said, even if she had no power to harm Gazura and his crew, bringing her to the bridge would be tantamount to suicide. But Gazura had his pride—as a pirate, as the leader of a fleet, and as a man. And she was worth taking that risk.

"Thank you. I humbly accept your invitation."

(What kind of man is this Yamada Seina, who makes this young lady go to such lengths?) As Gazura was captivated by Kirche's graceful bow, a strong interest in Seina and a hint of envy began to stir within him.

Chapter Six: The Showdown

"How ridiculous."

The main monitor on the Kamidake Bridge displayed recorded footage of Alan and the others attempting to escape. What's more, Alan deliberately turned toward the surveillance camera and gave it a smug look while flipping it off.

"So they headed for the pirates after all, didn't they?"

"Probably. He looks like he has absolutely no intention of returning to the GP."

"But what they took was a fake, right?"

"Of course."

"If so, they'll be sent back right away."

Kiriko and Hakuren spoke in a lighthearted tone, trying to ease Seina's sense of responsibility. But Seina remained deeply serious, head bowed the entire time.

"...Captain. This isn't solely your responsibility."

"If anything, it's the responsibility of the assistants—us,"

Kiriko and Amane said to Seina with wry smiles.

"But, if only my bad luck hadn't gotten in the way... My NB seems to be partly to blame too. Couldn't you go easy on Alan-san and the others as much as possible?"

"The original purpose of the Kamidake test was to see how we handle the captain's traits. Their actions can be seen as part of gathering behavioral pattern data on crew stress responses, so I think that aspect will be taken into consideration."

"Still, taking their belongings and deserting is a bit much, don't you think? Well, I suppose they'll be deemed in need of retraining."

"Y-yes. I suppose that can't be helped." Seina's expression softened as he looked at Amane and the others.

"More importantly, Captain. There's probably a reason NB escaped Kamidake."

"Reason?"

"Even if NB has some strange programming, there's no way NB would aid their escape without orders."

"What is it, Kiriko? Are you implying it's my fault?"

"Don't interrupt. What I'm getting at is that Kamidake's hyperspace communications are

being blocked."

For Kiriko and the crewmembers who knew NB's capabilities, those words held both purpose and reason, a double-edged meaning. NB allowed multiple individuals, including Airi and Kiriko, to monitor Seina and control NB remotely. But since hyperspace communication was impossible, this action must have been NB's own initiative. Yet that deviated from NB's core function, which was to assist its owner.

(It's almost as if it has a will of its own. Or is this also part of Airi-sama's programming?)

This event became the catalyst for Kiriko and the others to begin noticing Kirche's existence, though they wouldn't learn the truth until much later.

"So that's why—to relay information about Kamidake!?" Seina deduced NB's purpose from Kiriko's words.

"Maybe... if that's the case, things might change."

"But if the pirates find out..."

Though Seina worried about NB and Alan's safety, he immediately shifted his focus, realizing nothing could be done as things stood.

"Understood. I'll reset the hyperspace jump route settings."

"Roger! Hakuren, I'm resetting the rotation now. All crew except the captain and myself, enter rest mode. All remaining regular meals go to Amane. Everyone else takes concentrated supplement drinks. Maximum acceleration hyperspace for twenty-four hours. After that, the captain and I will take twelve hours of rest."

If Kiriko's plan worked, everyone should be refreshed in an hour. But this was still a desperate situation.

"During the time since Kamidake was attacked, Airi-sama and the others wouldn't have remained idle. Therefore, once we're all assembled, we'll operate non-stop until this is settled. Either way, Kamidake is in a state where it could reach its limit at any moment."

"Kiriko, what about while we're resting?"

"She'll be ready soon."

Kiriko looked confidently toward the central unit, where the captain and Kiriko's seat were located.

"Please, Kamidake."

——Kus, fufufu, ahahahaha.

A faint, girlish voice accompanied the appearance of a rainbow-colored hologram.

"This is... a Royal Tree!?"

"It's a computer unit developed by Airi-sama's team through their research on the Royal Trees. It possesses high learning capabilities, so while it can't fully replace everyone, as long as the captain and I are present, it should be fine for short periods."

"So gaining experience for that thing was part of the test too."

"According to the plan, we wouldn't have gathered enough information for it to withstand actual combat within the test period... if not for this accident, that is."

A blessing in disguise, indeed— Kiriko laughed with a disgruntled look on her face.

"So, does that mean it can already be used in combat?"

"Exactly! Got it? Everyone, hurry!"

"Roger!"

When Kiriko said this, everyone started to head to their respective posts.

【Hey, Kiriko】

Hakuren called out to Kiriko via secret communication.

【What is it?】

【To get Alan-kun and the others back safely, NB probably has to sacrifice himself, right?】

【Yeah... But NB can be replaced...】

【You noticed, right? There’s someone inside NB】

【...It might even be Airi-sama's program.】

【Yes. But do you truly believe that?】

【It's easier to think that way. But that... that overly human-like behavior is just too different from any AI I know... Still, protecting Seina-chan is the top priority right now.】

【Everyone except Seina-sama has noticed it... Don't forget that. 】

It meant she had no intention of forcing the guilt of sacrificing someone to protect Seina solely onto Kiriko.

【Thank you... Hakuren】

"Then, I'll leave the rest to you."

Hakuren flashed a bright smile and returned to her room. As Kiriko watched her retreating

figure and was about to sit down, Kamidake sounded the alarm.

"They're here. Captain, set course immediately!"

"Damn it! Will we make it in time?!"

Then, from the unit connected behind Kamidake, cannon fire was unleashed upon the pirate ship that had jumped out from behind.

"Kamidake!?"

Kiriko, seated in her chair, confirmed that all pirate ships were now incapacitated.

"Impressive... That's Amane-level reflexes. Thank you, Kamidake. Now, Captain, as usual, I'll leave it to you."

"Yes, then the predicted pirate positions... Ah, right, as usual, huh?"

Since they were settling this, there was no need to avoid the pirates. After a moment's thought, Seina set the course as usual.

"Found you! Seina-kun!!"

On the bridge of the disguised container ship, having just completed a hyperspace jump, Ryoko Balta let out a cry of joy, despite being in front of her crew and First Officer.

It was no surprise, considering that they hadn't heard anything about Kamidake for days, and the only clue they had was the reports of damage caused by the pirate ship. The First Officer watched with a smile, watching the girl's open joy, befitting her age.

"What about communications?"

"No luck. Something's still jamming us."

The operator struggled to capture a close-up of Kamidake battling Gazura’s fleet and the other pirate ships on the main monitor, but the ship's violent movements made it impossible. Ryoko swiftly manipulated her console, capturing a moment when Kamidake appeared in the feed and freezing it into a still image.

"That red thing covering Kamidake—that's it. The thing attached to the rear looks like a GP military add-on unit..."

"They must have seized it from pirates using it as contraband. Honestly, if this had been the next test voyage, it would have been quite the adventure." Airi slammed her fist on the desk in frustration.

"Indeed, Kamidake's high-output generator paired with Airi-sama's weaponry. It would have been an unstoppable force, wouldn't it?"

Screams of agony, a crimson-stained universe, Airi's maniacal laughter. Ryoko shook her head to dispel the unpleasant image and focused on the Kamidake before her.

"...Anyway, we need to get Kamidake to recognize us quickly!"

"Laser communication is ready."

"Thank you. ...Then, please proceed!"

Ryoko transformed into Elma's form. This form had faster reflexes and was easier to operate. At Elma's signal, the disguised container ship plunged into the combat zone where Kamidake was located.

"...This is incredible." The helmsman murmured in awe at Kamidake's godlike ship handling.

"But this makes communication impossible..."

Using directional laser communication meant essentially targeting Kamidake for attack. But Kamidake was currently engaged in combat and maneuvering evasively, making communication difficult.

"Kiriko-san and the others' competence is backfiring on us. Though that's precisely why we've made it this far unscathed..."

"From the looks of it, it looks like the Kamidake unit is starting to work. Hakuryo-kun will be very happy... We have no choice. Elma, send out an omnidirectional optical signal!"

"But then the other pirates will hear it!?"

"We only need them to recognize us. Kamidake will be able to lock onto us because they will be aware of our presence."

"I see. Understood!"

Just as Airi predicted, the signal briefly emitted from the disguised container ship prompted Kamidake to send coordinates via directional laser communication. But this meant Kamidake had effortlessly achieved an attack they couldn't land on them, which considerably disheartened the disguised container ship's gunner and pilot.

"Alright, emergency jump!"

At Elma's command, the disguised container ship jumped into hyperspace. As if anticipating that opening, Kamidake jumped simultaneously.

"Damn it! What kind of maneuver is that? It's nothing like anything we've seen before!" Gazura’s helmsman stared blankly at the space where Kamidake had vanished.

"Looks like they're getting serious too. More importantly, did you notice?"

"There was someone signaling Kamidake. It looked like a container transport ship, though?"

"True. Sealing them in containers is the quickest method. But still... that split-second exchange, and they jumped simultaneously."

"This puts them at a decisive advantage now. What do we do?"

“The game's far from over. Even if they share coordinates, with the AHP active, they can't jump out at the same spot. Trying to rendezvous takes time without hyperspace communications, and plenty of others are chasing Kamidake besides us. Release Kamidake's past movement data to the onlookers too. Have them scatter and jump to a few predicted locations, forcing Kamidake to load into a container and buying us time!"

"Roger."

"Are you there?" Ignoring the operator's reply, Gazura called someone up on his console.

"What's up, Gazura?"

"I split the fleet into two groups. As usual, I'll leave command of the other half to you."

As he spoke, Gazura rose from the captain's chair and approached the main monitor displaying the man's image with palpable excitement. Then, out of Kirche's view, he signaled something with his right hand.

"And as you saw, we have one more target."

"The container ship, right?"

"That's right. If Kamidake gets stored aboard that thing, it'll be trouble. Do whatever it takes to stop it."

"Roger."

As the man's image faded, the operator relayed that preparations were complete.

"Alright! Jump to the predicted location."

Several tens of minutes later, when Gazura’s fleet jumped out of hyperspace, they were still quite distant from Kamidake. However, over fifty pirate ships had already locked onto it. By the time Gazura’s fleet jumped to that location, the number had exceeded one hundred.

"Where's the container ship!?"

"Unable to confirm! No, hold on a moment..."

As pirate ships learning Kamidake's position via the network jumped out one after another, the operator noticed a ship that had jumped out at a distant location firing a light signal.

"Container ship detected!"

"Good, we've successfully split them up."

"Kamidake has detached its unit! The unit is self-destructing!!"

Before the operator could finish speaking, the monitor went completely white for an instant. Immediately, a filter activated, automatically locking onto Kamidake's image.

"Damn, that was fast! What the hell was that!?"

Kamidake, having detached its unit became more nimble, slipping through the approaching pirate ships with UFO-like movements that were hard to believe were those of a ship.

"...Oh, an Imperial Ship."

Kamidake's movements closely resembled those of the Imperial Ship etched in Gazura's memory. For Gazura, it was a nightmare-like recollection, and his voice trembled as he murmured.

"Don't let Kamidake make contact with the container ship!"

"The onlookers are getting in the way!"

The plan to separate Kamidake from the container ship backfired. With a large number of pirates with no fleet training gathered in a small space, any poorly executed attacks or movements would likely result in mutual destruction.

"Kamidake is making contact with the container ship!"

"!! Marker!" Gazura reflexively yelled at the operator's shout.

"Kamidake is withdrawing from the combat zone! It's heading this way!"

"Prepare to stow Kamidake!"

"But some ships have already regained their footing. Wouldn't another jump be safer?"

"Then we'll just end up in the same situation again. If we store it at the back of the container, we won't have to slow down!"

"Roger. Stowing in the back of the container!"

The rear of the disguised container ship began opening into small block-like sections. However, the pirate ship began its attack, and the disguised container ship began evading fiercely.

"Our trajectory is unstable! We really should jump once to regain our position..."

"Don't worry! Leave it to Kamidake!"

As the disguised container ship dodged the fierce attacks while advancing, Kamidake stuck to its rear like glue.

"Amazing! Kamidake has positioned itself on the rear axis of this ship."

"Tractor beam firing!"

"Tractor beam has captured Kamidake! Within axis tolerance!"

"No problem, forcibly drag it in! Once Kamidake is stowed, emergency jump!"

The moment the Kamidake was docked with such force that it seemed as if it would crash, thin thread-like objects stretched out from the red paint on the exterior of the Kamidake. The thread was cut by the closed bulkhead and contracted into the exterior wall of the container, transforming into a circular stain-like object and adhering to it. Immediately afterwards, the container ship jumped into hyperspace.

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"Captain, it seems one marker activated."

Gazura's operator wiped sweat from his brow with a sigh of relief.

"Only one unit... Well, we certainly didn't anticipate such intense usage."

"A marker? But isn't the battle already as good as decided?"

"Don't be too relieved, young lady. Kamidake's mass is unstable due to the unit's self-destruction and the AHP reaction caused by our attacks. Even that jump just now was only an emergency short-distance jump. In that case, we still have a chance!" Gazura raised his voice, as if to rally himself and his crew, and glared at Kirche.

"I see. You're right, it was premature to think it was over."

"Though our chance will likely be limited to just one more attempt."

It was a whisper too quiet for Kirche to hear.

"Kamidake's micro-vibrations won't stop!"

Just as Gazura had predicted, the container ship was navigating hyperspace in an unstable state due to the mass leakage from Kamidake's outer hull.

"This is no joke. How did they manage to escape this long in this condition?" The helmsman, struggling to stabilize the hull, felt a renewed sense of awe bordering on fear at Kamidake's performance and the skill of the human piloting it.

"Control! Full output! Focus on maintaining hyperspace navigation! Airi-sama!"

"Data analysis complete. Sending the coating agent formulation data for processing. Also, it appears the container has a marker attached, so be careful when you exit hyperspace."

Airi's data was input immediately, and the mixed coating agent was promptly sprayed onto the Kamidake inside the container.

"Outer hull temperature decreasing. Kamidake's vibrations stabilizing."

"Begin the rescue once the hull stabilizes!"

"Captain, hyperspace navigation limit! Returning to normal space in twenty seconds." The helmsman's voice was almost a scream.

"How long until Kamidake's condition stabilizes?"

"About ten minutes."

"As soon as communications with Kamidake are restored, assess the crew's condition! If it's not urgent, prioritize the long-range jump! Ten minutes should be fine, but everyone, don't neglect your anti-aircraft surveillance!"

"Roger! Returning to normal space. All hands, brace for impact!"

DUOON! With a shock equivalent to a magnitude 5 earthquake, the container ship emerged into normal space. Conversely, in normal space, Kamidake's mass anomaly had little effect, and the container ship was freed from the vibrations.

"No abnormalities detected on the hull. No enemy presence within the alert perimeter!"

"Good. If we keep going like this..."

"Captain, we've established a wired connection with Kamidake. Communication is possible."

Before the First Officer could finish speaking, Elma stood up with a bright expression.

"Seina-kun, Seina-kun! Are you okay?"

"Elma-san!?... Oh, Ryoko-san, right?"

"It doesn't matter. Ah, thank goodness... Is everyone else okay?"

"Yes... though we’re a bit hungry."

"Hehe, you can eat whenever you want. Once Kamidake's condition stabilizes..."

"Gravitational wave detection, ship jumping out! Fast!"

"Elma, run!" Kiriko cut into the operator's transmission and shouted.

"Kamidake's mass isn't stabilized yet!"

Kiriko's scream instantly made Elma understand the situation. Even if it was a disguise, a transport-shaped ship couldn't possibly move like a combat vessel designed for battle like the Kamidake. Moreover, attempting an emergency jump was out of the question—re-entering hyperspace with the Kamidake's mass in such an unstable state carried far too great a risk. This pirate assault was, given the circumstances, unavoidable.

"Enemy projectile breached shields and impacted!"

The AHP fired from the pirate ship struck the disguised container ship's shield, converting into mass energy. In doing so, it created a small hole in the shield, forcing the non-evaporated portion into the shield.

"Elma!"

"It's fine, this scenario was anticipated! Simultaneously with Kamidake's mass stabilization, we'll purge the armor surface, strip the paint, and jump into hyperspace! After that..."

——Then it's up to the pirates to be satisfied with this situation.

Elma clenched her hands as if praying. But...

"Weight shock detection!"

"Gah!"

The object that hyperspace jumped in was an anchor ship, a vessel designed to fix a fleet in space.

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"!!?"

Kirche's expression changed as the connection to the disguised ship abruptly severed. Seeing Kirche's bloodshot eyes, Gazura grinned.

"Looks like it worked out nicely."

"Chief, they've captured Kamidake!" The operator's report confirmed Gazura's expectations.

"Don't let your guard down yet! They're the Academy. They're probably doing something to Kamidake inside that container!"

Glancing sideways at Kirche's expression as he finished speaking, Gazura finally looked at Kirche with a look that seemed unable to contain his joy.

"We're not idiots either. We considered AHP operations and how they'd counter us. Though Kamidake's tenacity and the Academy's ability to devise countermeasures so quickly from our situation assessments did exceed our expectations. Well, I'll just say it plainly: hats off to them." Gazura's lighthearted tone revealed just how immense the pressure had been.

"...Kamidake, no, did you know where that container ship would jump?"

"Roughly, yes. Still, given the situation in this sector, we had a pretty good idea of which direction it would likely retreat. So, by waiting at that predicted location and receiving the marker's signal, we could lock onto it in a very short time."

"...So the objective of that detachment was the container ship carrying Kamidake from the start..." Kirche's expression twisted as if she finally conceded defeat at this point.

"The situation and luck were just too bad for them. Otherwise, they would have completely escaped."

Suddenly, a field appeared around Kirche, trapping her inside.

"What the...?"

"Sorry about that. There's no guarantee you'll stay quiet from here on out." Gazura's expression as he looked at Kirche was sorrowful, a stark contrast to before.

Gazura had taken a liking to Kirche and held respect for Kamidake's crew.

(If only Tarrant hadn't given that order...)

He didn't want to see Kirche's sad face, but from Gazura's position, there was nothing more he could do.

"Alright, jump!" Gazura commanded, as if to shake off those feelings.

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"Damn! Using an anchor ship meant for mooring battleship-class vessels?"

Pirate ships jumped out one after another around the anchored Kamidake, like sharks drawn by the scent of blood.

"As soon as Kamidake's coating is complete, we'll release the container. Please escape, at least you two!"

"No, Elma! We don't know what they'll do to you if you're captured!"

"If Seina-kun gets captured, it'll be even worse! Besides, we can't let them take the cargo on Kamidake! As long as my identity remains unknown, I can manage somehow."

With Elma present, returning to the Academy through hostage negotiations was possible. And with Ryoko's lieutenants there, many pirates would likely offer various favors.

"Ryoko Balta's death hasn't been made public yet. We could even say you're the lucky pirate who captured Kamidake."

"Leave Elma-sama to us." The First Officer declared firmly.

But that very statement turned despairing in the next instant.

"High-mass wave detection! A super-battleship-class vessel is jumping-out!"

"Da, Daidoros..."

Seeing the shockwaves of the mass wave, Elma instantly recognized it as Daidoros'.

"Daidoros!?"

Elma's murmuring voice instantly created a tense atmosphere on the bridge.

With Tarrant, who knew the truth, now present, Elma's plan was useless. Worse still, at this point, Elma's fate was as good as sealed.

——Then...

Use the ship as a shield for Kamidake's escape by detonating it. Elma's silent resolve was understood by the bridge crew, and none objected.

"Seina-kun, coating operations will be complete in two minutes. Evacuate immediately..."

"No!" Realizing Elma's intent, Seina alone raised his voice from the silent Kamidake bridge.

"Huh!?"

Seina's powerful words were like a wind blowing away the heavy clouds. They completely transformed the bridge's atmosphere, which had been filled with resignation and despair.

"I won't allow it! No way!"

"Bu-but—"

Elma was overwhelmed by Seina's force. Just then, the anchor began to tow Kamidake, moving it toward Daidoros.

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"Hmph! Finally caught you."

"Gazura, it took you quite a while. But I suppose everyone gathered here has learned just how tenacious Yamada Seina is."

This meant Tarrant hadn't fallen behind Yamada Seina before due to inexperience. Satisfied at having captured him in full view of everyone, Tarrant's expression broke into a smile all on its own.

"Hmph. Don't let your guard down yet."

"Yes."

The expression on the Chief Adjutant's face, filled with relief at accomplishing the mission of capturing Yamada Seina and imagining the enormous reward and promotion that would follow, was strangely twisted.

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"...But if we don't do this, everyone will be sacrificed... There's no time! Hurry!"

"Elma! Have everyone put on their spacesuits and board through the coated front hatch!"

"What are you saying, Kiriko-san!?"

"I'm only following the captain's orders."

"Ah, Elma. And the food supplies too, please."

"Oh, even you, Amane-san!"

Seeing Kiriko and Amane's expressions, Elma gave up trying to persuade Seina. But even in this worst-case scenario, she hadn't resigned herself to death alongside them. She wasn't certain, but a glimmer of hope began to shine within Elma.

"What about controlling the container ship? Wired optical communication during coating won't have enough capacity!"

"The auto-program—we'll transfer the one we built over to your ship. Use that, and Kamidake's AI can handle the rest. Hurry!”

"First Officer, evacuate everyone except bridge personnel to Kamidake immediately!"

"Understood."

Once the decision was made, subsequent actions were swift. The highly trained crew completed both the transfer to Kamidake and the piloting switchover in about five minutes.

"Seina-san!"

Kirche watched from the bridge of Gazura’s ship as the Kamidake was towed toward Daidoros, gritting her teeth. As Gazura had said, her expression suggested she might do something unpredictable if not restrained.

"Don't let your guard down. They'll definitely try something."

"Captain! The container ship's energy readings are spiking!"

"They're going to self-destruct! Cut the anchor! Don't let Kamidake escape!"

The moment Gazura finished speaking, the main monitor on the bridge went completely white for a moment, due to the light from the container ship's explosion. However, a filter

was quickly applied, and the image of the container ship shattered into pieces appeared. However, Kamidake was no longer there.

“Damn it! Omni-directional surveillance… Whoa!!”

Just as Gazura was about to give orders to the operator, an energy surge more powerful than the previous explosion enveloped the main monitor in white light once more.

"Daidoros fired their diffusion beam!"

“Diffusion Beam!?”

"Kamidake captured!"

Daidoros' low-output diffused beam extinguished the container ship's explosion and vaporized the surface coating of Kamidake, which was attempting to escape. The explosive impact made it difficult for the Kamidake to navigate.

"Anchor! Grab it!!"

"Run!"

But Kirche's voice, which had sounded like a scream, quickly turned into a moan of despair.

One of the two anchor ships fired a tractor beam, barely managing to capture Kamidake. Though the anchor ship itself had taken a direct hit from Daidoros' beam, its design inherently anticipated such attacks, built robustly for its role of mooring enemies. While enduring Kamidake's desperate attempts to break free, the anchor ship fired one tractor beam after another, finally securing Kamidake completely.

"...No way..."

Amid the cheers of the bridge crew, Kirche slumped into her chair, hung her head, and remained completely still. Gazura watched her with a look of mixed emotions, but, relieved that the mission had been successfully completed, he stretched his arms wide.

"That settles it, then."

"Good work, Gazura."

Tarrant, displayed on the main monitor, was in high spirits after securing Seina and Kiriko. Still, seemingly finding further conversation bothersome, he promptly switched the feed to the Chief Adjutant.

"Alright, you lot keep watch and make sure the onlookers don't interfere!"

The young Chief Adjutant, hoping Gazura wouldn't get killed, looked down on him with contempt. Gazura felt a slight irritation at the arrogant attitude, but the exhilaration of

completing the mission and securing Kirche overpowered it.

"Roger that." Gazura said with a grin on his face as he straightened his posture.

"Hmph! Well, do your best... What? Kirche!?"

The aide, about to cut the transmission, glanced behind Gazura at the crew member who had approached and whispered something. Even Tarrant seemed intrigued by the name, forcing his own image over the aide's.

(Damn it!)

The earlier excitement vanished. Gazura cursed his own carelessness and bad luck for bringing Kirche onto the bridge.

"Gazura, what is that?" Tarrant's eyes shone like a child who'd found a coveted toy.

"This one... I picked her up along the way..."

"I'll explain the rest." Kirche abruptly stood up, cutting Gazura off.

"Alright, let's hear it." Tarrant grinned, shooting Gazura a glance as if to say he was in the way.

"...It's pointless to make a deal." Gazura whispered to Kirche under his breath as he reluctantly moved toward the captain's chair.

No matter what conditions were offered, Tarrant would never spare Seina's life. He'd take everything he wanted and give nothing back but death. Tarrant was a man who took without giving.

"Rest assured, I won't say anything unnecessary."

"Is that so? Well then, do your best." Suppressing his dissatisfaction, Gazura sat down roughly in the captain's chair.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Kirche, right? I've seen your show."

"Thank you. I'm surprised someone knows me in a place like this, though I suppose it's different at the Academy."

Kirche flattered the man's ego with her words and flashed a captivating, exquisite smile. Just as she intended, Tarrant broke into a delighted grin Gazura had never seen before.

(Whoa, seriously...? So this is his true nature... meaning he's just a kid.)

Realizing this, Gazura moved his chair out of Tarrant's line of sight to avoid displeasing him, then began his work, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. The bridge crew followed suit, immersing themselves in their tasks and fading into the background.

"You'd be making a mistake to underestimate our intelligence network. Well, an AI possessing Astral is rare enough, but to climb all the way to idol status... you are practically one of a kind."

"Then you know I'm... listed as missing, right?"

"Of course. But I never expected to meet you here."

"Actually, I..." Kirche, seeing Tarrant take the bait, began telling her own story.

(What a remarkable young lady. I never imagined she'd draw that man so completely into her orbit... though that'll likely end once they discuss how to handle Yamada Seina.)

It was taboo for idols to hint at the existence of a specific man, no matter where you were in the world. The moment Kirche mentioned Yamada Seina, negotiations with Tarrant would end.

But whether she knew it or not, Kirche maintained Tarrant's interest with her masterful storytelling. It captivated not only Gazura ship's bridge crew, but even the Daidoros crew.

(...Huh?)

As Kirche and Tarrant's conversation approached twenty minutes, Gazura finally noticed the unnaturalness of it and looked over at Kirche.

Kirche stuck solely to personal anecdotes and small talk that Tarrant found interesting, showing no sign of broaching the main subject. To Gazura, it looked like nothing more than a deliberate attempt to stall for time.

"Tarrant-san, it's a shame to part ways, but it's about time."

"What?"

Kirche bowed deeply to Tarrant, then turned to Gazura and smiled.

"Everyone, please stay seated."

The very next moment, an unimaginably fierce vibration and blinding light struck Gazura’s ship. It felt like a sun had appeared right beside them.

"!!"

Gazura knew exactly who could cause such a situation. But...

Myaaaaaan!! Gyagau, gyagyagyagyagyan!!!

(Is it... an Imperial Ship!?)

The Imperial Ship was a phenomenon that appeared with overwhelming power, like a force of nature. Yet this entity radiated clear hostility. Moreover, its voice carried a violent intimidation powerful enough to make one abandon even instinctive self-defense.

Yet this overwhelming presence vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Wh-what just happened!? What the hell was that!?"

"I-I don't know. I can tell some kind of insane energy entity passed through, but... It will take 30 seconds for the sensors to recover from the damage."

Both Gazura's voice and the operator's trembled with fear. But Gazura's senses still detected that crushing, murderous intent.

"...No, it hasn't passed... It's still there!"

"No way, that can't be!?"

"Can you jump?"

"No, no. We're paralyzed from the damage we received earlier. It will take at least some time to check..."

——Myaaaan.

"Wh-what the!?"

——Myan, Myaa, Myaaaaaaan.

"It seems to be high-speed language communication... Sensors are recovery!"

Simultaneously with the operator's words, the main monitor displayed the figure of Ryo-Ohki, its crystal horns glowing red as it captured Daidoros with a tractor beam. It was a surprisingly small ship.

"Wh-what... is that?"

"I-I don't know. Judging by the silhouette, the closest match is... Ryo... Ryo-Ohki!?"

The operator's voice was clearly confused. And no wonder...

"You mean that legendary Ryo-Ohki, the ship that single-handedly declared war on Jurai? But didn't Ryo-Ohki die in a mutual kill with Jurai's Crown Prince...?"

"No, that's definitely it! You saw it too, right? The only thing I know that possesses such unimaginable energy mass is an Imperial Ship. And the only thing comparable to that is..."

"...I-I can't believe it! That legendary hero, Ryo-Ohki, is right here before us!"

"Don't get the wrong idea! It's not necessarily on our side. It's actually captured Daidoros!" Gazura bellowed loudly, as if to rally his flagging resolve.

In stark contrast, the young operator was giddy with excitement at seeing Ryo-Ohki. The difference between them lay in whether they perceived Ryo-Ohki as enemy or ally... in other words, the gap in experience and sense of crisis.

"Huh, but!?"

"You fool! Ryo-Ohki was a pirate who always acted alone. An enemy's enemy isn't necessarily an ally. The enemy of my enemy could be my enemy too... Whoa!?"

At that moment, Gazura's ship suddenly began to move with a small vibration.

"Captain, the ship's moving on its own! It's being controlled from outside!!"

"External control?!"

"The escort ships are moving suspiciously too! Damn it, right into Ryo-Ohki's tractor beam!"

As if drawn in, a small vessel from the Gazura fleet slammed into Ryo-Ohki's tractor beam. Instantly, the small ship began being dragged toward Ryo-Ohki with terrifying force, but the sheer momentum snapped its hull clean in two.

"No doubt about it, it's that bastard Tarrant! He's trying to ram us into Ryo-Ohki's tractor beam to break free!"

"If we ram that powerful tractor beam, this ship will be torn apart too!"

"That damn brat! Find the control terminal! It has to be somewhere!"

"All internal sensors are dead. It's too late now!"

"Move aside!"

The shockwave from Ryo-Ohki's Gungnir moments ago had disabled the field control, releasing Kirche from her restraints. She shoved the young operator aside and began manipulating the terminal.

"Hey! What the hell!?"

"Leave it to me!"

Instinctively, Gazura restrained the young operator who tried to stop Kirche. Kirche fully unleashed her abilities as an NB, checking the computer at a speed beyond human capability.

"...Impressive. We've partially regained control of the ship!"

"So the Philosopher's NB isn't just for show..."

"There are two fake control terminals here. Destroy them immediately!"

Kirche displayed the ship's layout on the main monitor. One of them was, unsurprisingly, the

young operator's room.

"My... my room!?"

"Whoever's nearby, just destroy it!"

"B-Boss! Don't damage anything inside!"

"I don't care! Blow the whole room to smithereens!"

"No, please—"

The exchange between Gazura and the young operator felt like a son watching his father throw away something precious. Even the bridge crew, who should have been frozen with tension, laughed at the comedic dialogue.

"Creating a control bypass. Free up all bridge terminals!"

No one dared question Kirche's actions anymore. Once each operator had freed their terminal operation rights, Kirche extended a terminal control lead from her body and connected it to the bridge terminal.

"I get that this is incredible... but what the hell is that girl doing?"

Gazura was stunned by the various ship data displayed on the monitor. He understood only one thing: the sheer volume of information displayed was staggering.

"That girl... she's controlling all the allied ships."

"No way!?"

"That explains why Masaki Airi built the workshop."

"Confirmed destruction of the fake terminal! Bypass formation complete. Fleet command authority regained!"

Once command of Gazura’s fleet was restored, the links between ships were freed. Control from Tarrant had apparently been relayed through Gazura’s flagship, and all ships regained control and simultaneously withdrew.

"Captain. Daidoros has jumped."

Kirche's efforts were too late, as a dozen pirate ships crashed into Ryo-Ohki's tractor beam, freeing Daidoros from its restraints.

"Damn it! Well, whatever. At least this means we're done with that disgusting brat." Gazura said while staring at the space where Daidoros had vanished, then turned to look at Kirche.

(...Now then, what should I do with this young lady?)

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Not a single voice could be heard on Kamidake's bridge after it was all over. Only silence reigned.

(...Ahh... Thank goodness)

Overwhelmed with joy at having protected Seina, Kiriko fought back tears. Desperately holding back her overflowing emotions, Kiriko slowly rose from her seat and moved to look at Seina's face.

(Huh!?)

Kiriko noticed that everyone else on the bridge—Amane, Hakuren, Karen, Gyokuren, Suiren, and Ryoko—had also stood up, staring at Seina just like her. Realizing they all felt the same way, Kiriko felt a strange sense of unity wash over her, making her inexplicably amused.

"Heh heh, giggle giggle"

And it wasn't just Kiriko—everyone started laughing.

"Heh heh, ahahahaha"

"Huh!?"

Seina, who had been glaring at the space where Daidoros had vanished, noticed the laughter and the relaxed atmosphere.

"Um... what's going on?"

Realizing he was the center of attention, Seina looked around at Kiriko and the others in puzzlement. But their laughter showed no sign of stopping.

A few minutes later, a light communication arrived on the peaceful Kamidake's Bridge, informing them that the escaped NB and Alan had been returned.

"Whew, it's over."

"We're so relieved Seina-sama and the others are safe..."

Airi and Ringo simultaneously sank deep into their chairs, leaning back and letting out huge sighs. Their expressions mirrored those of Kiriko and the others on the Kamidake bridge.

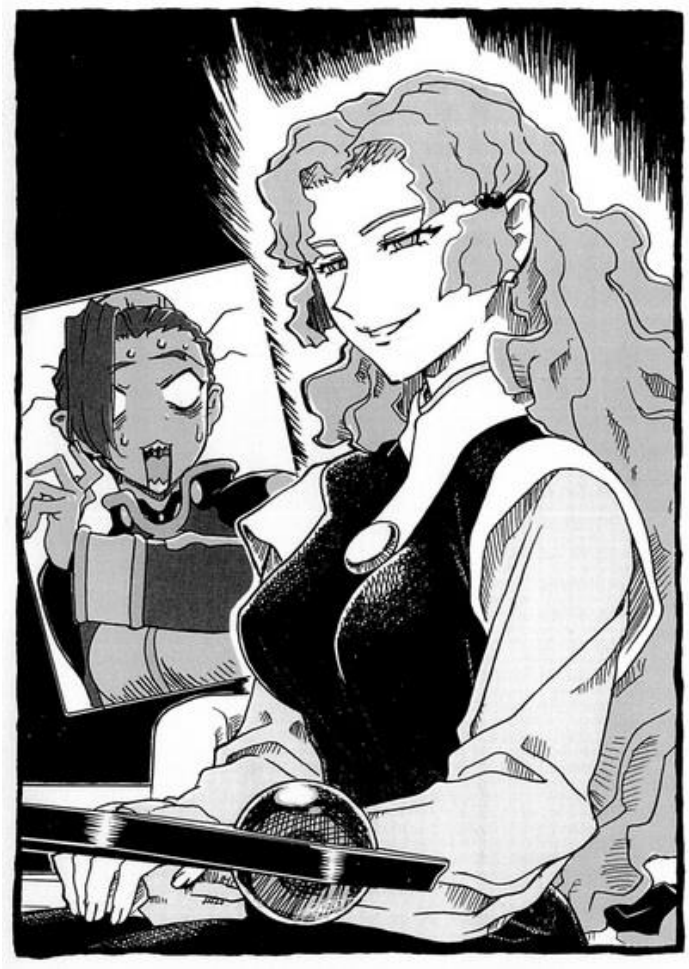
"...But I'm a little disappointed we couldn't be of much help."

"That's just how it is when you're in command. Well, that old fox who dumped that thankless task on you must be satisfied, right?"

"I'm not so sure about that. She's quite the greedy one, so I expect she'll find plenty to criticize."

"Not spoiling her is important too, you know. But it just means she expects a lot from you."

"This incident has revealed a number of accounting holes, so we will use those improvements to make up for the shortfalls."



"Oh, you're a demon, Ringo-chan."

This was the moment that gave birth to the demon who made demons cry, "The Demon Princess of Accounting."

"More importantly, Kirche-san has a very unfortunate role to play."

"If you keep saying things like that, you'll fall behind. Kirche-chan can meet Seina-kun anytime in her subconscious, but for Ringo-chan, the real battle starts now."

"The real test, you say?"

"Kamidake is heading to Jurai with the package now. If you dawdle too much, the other girls will beat you to it."

"Ah, I see. I must go and thank Seina-sama directly. Kiriko-san has also been very kind to me."

"Heh heh, this should be interesting."

"But Airi-sama, we need to tell Tennyo-san and the others about Seina-kun's safety soon. I'll also report to everyone who helped us."

"Oh no! I have to hurry or Tennyo-chan will get impatient and come storming in yelling. ...That girl takes after her mother in more ways than one. I'll come over to your place later then!" Airi quickly stood up and ended the call.

"Good work. Now, I should get ready too."

Ringo quickly drafted a report for Seto and began accessing systems to disseminate the results to all relevant parties.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

The young operator asked Gazura, who watched the receding small boat with eyes like a father seeing off his departing daughter.

"She saved our lives. We had to do this to save face, right?"

"Ah, no, that's not what I meant..."

The young operator wasn't dissatisfied with the decision to send Kirche back. It was just that, having seen Gazura make such cold, calculated judgments before, this felt a little out of character.

"Getting a gun shoved in our faces and reluctantly handing her over would be pathetic... Besides, that girl framed Tarrant."

"Ah!"

The young operator instantly realized the danger of keeping Kirche close.

"That bastard used us as pawns, but thanks to that, we severed ties with him penalty-free. He can't touch us now, but keeping that girl would be different. That vindictive bastard wouldn't just stand by and watch. It's best to send that dangerous cargo home with the troublemaker and focus Tarrant's grudge solely on Yamada Seina."

"T-true..."

"And while the Bridge crew knows, you too—no word about that girl to anyone."

"I-I understand. But it's a bit unfair to her..."

"What are you talking about? She's far safer over there than she is with me, right?"

"Y-Yeah, you're right. With that power, Tarrant wouldn't dare touch her."

Kamidake and Ryo-Ohki were visible where the small boat was heading. Many pirate ships still remained anchored there, surrounding the Ryo-Ohki without attempting to flee.

The scene resembled worshippers bowing before a revered god, with Kamidake as the divine offering and Kirche like a shrine maiden returning to the deity.

"Still, you don't get to see a sight like this very often."

"Yeah... you're right."

The young operator continued to gaze at the scene before them with eyes full of awe.

Chapter Seven: Preliminary Battles

After the small ship carrying Kirche and the others was stored within Kamidake, Ryo-Ohki stored Kamidake in a compression bay and headed for Jurai. During that time, not a single pirate ship in the vicinity dared to attack Ryo-Ohki. After witnessing such overwhelming power and seeing even Daidoros flee without a second thought, anyone who still dared to provoke them would be either a fool, a suicide seeker, or a martyr.

In the Kamidake's storage bay, Seina and the girls met up with Alan and his team, who had been sent back by Gazura. Alan's group looked decidedly awkward, but it was Alan who spoke first.

"Please believe us! We never had the slightest intention of betraying the captain! We were solely focused on trying to resolve Kamidake's situation! Naturally, we begged the pirates desperately to spare your lives too. That's why we took that package!" Alan bowed his head deeply and spoke rapidly.

Then, looking up slightly, "Besides, to be honest, this whole plan was the Captain's NB's idea in the first place. We just helped carry it out."

Of course, Kiriko, Amane, and Seina knew full well that Alan had been the driving force behind the plan, and NB had merely made its execution feasible. Their silence in response to Alan's words stemmed solely from the fact that his actions had advanced the situation.

"Anyway, I'm relieved you're all safe. Alan-san and you guys must be exhausted, so let's leave this discussion here. We've restocked our supplies sufficiently, so please wait in your quarters until we arrive at Jurai."

Seina's tone was matter-of-fact, but his words came from the heart. In any case, the decision on Alan's punishment lay with Airi; Seina had no authority over it.

(What would I do?)

Seina was thinking of his own approach to dealing with Alan and his team because, as the captain, he wanted to use Airi's judgment as a lesson. As he considered this, he glanced at the quiet NB. He had expected NB to start off by making excuses, but instead he was floating silently diagonally in front of Alan.

"Airi-sama says she needs me. NB, come to my room." Seina said, then turned on his heel and started walking.

The moment Seina and the others disappeared through the hatch, Alan gave NB a light shove.

"I kept quiet about you making some deal with the pirate captain. So don't go blabbing about anything else. Damn, this is a real pain in the ass." Alan clicked his tongue softly, then started walking, taking Barry and Cohen with him.

"I thought we'd get chewed out, but that went surprisingly smoothly, Alan."

"Hmph, of course! It's all the Captain's NB's fault. If this gets out, it'll be on the captain's head. He knows he's in no position to complain to us."

"I see."

"But are you sure it'll be okay?"

"If we get blamed, we just tell the truth. You heard the captain's words earlier, right? That meant we'd all keep quiet and let it slide. That way, neither of our records gets tarnished, and we'll be welcomed back as heroes who safely delivered Seto-sama's cargo."

"Oh! Come to think of it, the captain did say 'until we reach Jurai,' didn't he?"

"That's the very thing pirates chased so desperately. And the target is none other than Seto-sama, said to be Jurai's shadow ruler. Heh... I expect all sorts of things from this."

"All sorts of things to look forward to?"

"For example..."

In stark contrast to when they'd arrived, Alan and the others disappeared through the hatch in high spirits. With all life signs gone, the hangar's lights automatically dimmed to a bare minimum.

A quiet, empty hangar... NB remained silent, standing still.

"...I'm glad... you're safe. Seina-san." NB spoke in Kirche's voice, savoring the words, then began to let out a small sob.

"Myaa, myaa, myaa!"

In Kamidake's cafeteria, the humanoid Ryo-Ohki sat happily on Seina's lap. It was because Seina, Kiriko, Amane, Hakuren, and the others had showered her with praise. But the one even happier than the Ryo-Ohki was Ryoko Balta.

"It's an honor to meet you, Ryo-Ohki-san, the legendary pirate ship."

"Legendary, you say?"

"Yes. She's the ship that invaded Planet Jurai all by herself and caused a huge ruckus. My name comes from Ryo-Ohki's captain, Ryoko-sama. Speaking of which, what happened to Ryoko-sama?"

"Myaa."

"She's not here this time," Kiriko translated.

"I see. That's a shame. But meeting Ryo-Ohki-san like this must be fate. I'd love to hear all about your battles on Jurai and such?"

"Myaa?"

"Um, Ryoko-san?"

"Kiriko-san, if it's not too much trouble... I'd be grateful if you could treat me the same way you did with Elma?" Ryoko's expression turned slightly sad at Kiriko's somewhat formal words.

Though her form was different, her tone and aura were unmistakably Elma's.

"Heh, I see. Well then, Ryoko. Ryo-chan is the regenerated second Ryo-Ohki, so she doesn't have any memories from before." Kiriko said with a wry smile.

"But I heard she was killed in a duel with the Crown Prince of Jurai?"

"She was sealed away on Earth until recently, but an incident triggered her release. Ah, Elma, you know how this story will be handled, right?"

"Of course, I won't discuss it elsewhere. But if that's the case, was it acceptable to expose her presence to the pirates? "

"Well... it could cause quite a stir, but she was always a mysterious pirate to begin with. And since the rescue request came from Airi-sama, I imagine she has some plan in mind."

"Speaking of which, how did Ryo-chan get here? It seems quite a distance from Earth?" Amane asked, stroking Ryo-Ohki's throat with her index finger as if petting a cat.

"Meow, meow, meow!"

"So, you came all the way to Jurai alone on an errand for Professor Washu... I mean, Washu-chan? That's impressive."

"Myaa!"

"Professor Washu!? Could it be that Hakubi Washu-sama is also on Earth?"

At Ryoko's joyful exclamation, Kiriko flashed a look of sudden realization. For Ryoko, who was also Elma, the legendary philosopher Hakubi Washu was the most fascinating figure imaginable. But now that she knew of the existence of the Ryo-Ohki, hiding anything was pointless.

"...Well Ryoko, since you'll be acting alongside the captain from now on, it's best to tell you everything. Besides Ryoko-san and Hakubi Washu-sama, the missing daughters of the current Jurai Emperor, Aeka-sama and Sasami-sama, are also on Earth. Only a very few people at the Academy and on Jurai know this. Keep it secret from everyone here, even your First Officer."

"Understood." Ryoko shook her head with a broad smile.

The Academy's most brilliant philosopher gone missing, and Juraian royalty. This was the

unraveling of a truly great historical mystery. If she were in Elma's form, she'd surely be wagging her tail enthusiastically.

"Also, I fully understand your desire to meet them directly. But remember, their very existence involves troublesome issues, and Earth is also a special protected zone for Jurai."

"Yes. I'll keep that firmly in mind."

"Myan"

As if waiting for the conversation to pause, Ryo-Ohki looked up at Seina with a delighted expression.

"What is it?"

"Myaa."

When their eyes met, Ryo-Ohki flashed a slightly mischievous smile and quickly looked away from Seina.

"It's a secret, apparently."

"Oh, I see. Hahaha... But Kiriko-san, you really understand what Ryo-chan is saying, don't you?"

"Ryo-chan's speech is a special high-speed language—like listening to a recording played back at high speed. So, you just sort of get used to it over time. Even people without Bio-Enhancement can understand it eventually, though it takes longer. But for Seina-chan, with Bio-Enhancement, it's instant."

"Huh, really?"

Seina looked at Ryo-Ohki with interest, then lifted her up as she was slipping down a bit and sat her back in a more comfortable position.

"Still, she's really taken to you, hasn't she? Maybe you like kids, Seina?"

"It’s not a matter of liking or disliking them. I wasn't allowed near them. I barely have any memories of playing with my own sister."

"Ah, I see. You're dangerous around little kids, after all."

"Myaa, myaa."

Ryo-Ohki stroked Seina's cheek a little roughly, as if to comfort his sad expression.

Ryo-Ohki's affection for Seina wasn't just because she'd been treated kindly before. It stemmed from the feelings Tenchi, whom Ryo-Ohki adored, showed toward Seina and any mention of him. To Tenchi, Seina was like a close younger brother. Seeing that, it was only natural Ryo-Ohki would have a favorable impression of Seina. Plus, he was about to become

the master of her sister.

"Thank you, I'm fine now."

"Myaaaan♡" Ryo-Ohki happily leaned against Seina.

"Everyone, dinner is ready!"

Hakuren and the others arrived carrying trays piled high with food.

"Haaah, smells so good... How many days has it been since I had a proper meal like this..." Amane said with deep emotion as she looked at the array of dishes being set on the table.

Of course, all the Kamidake crew felt the same way, but Alan and his team waiting in their quarters seemed to have slightly different thoughts.

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"Damn it, what is this food?" Alan grumbled in dissatisfaction as he looked at the menu, which was the same meal Hakuren and the others had brought.

"The pirates treated us better than this!"

"With the pirates, it was only until they realized the cargo was fake. After that..."

"I never thought a pirate would have that awful drink."

"Compared to that..."

"Hey, hey, did you forget about the captain's NB? He should've shown more consideration, right?"

"You should stop right there. Even if it was the captain's NB's fault, the fact remains you went along with it... Anyway, I'm just glad we made it back safely." Barry scolded Alan, clearly thinking he'd gone too far.

"Damn it! If only that package had been real... By now..."

"Whoa! Same dish as always, but it tastes way better than usual!"

Cohen, who had ordered food and started eating without anyone noticing, exclaimed in surprise.

"When did you...?"

"Here, Barry, try some too."

Cohen held out a plate of stew to Barry, who had approached. Barry's expression instantly changed to one of astonishment as he tasted it.

"Damn, this is good. How'd you do it?"

"Because the ingredients are good. Plus, the cooking method is different from mass-produced stuff. I think they probably cooked each portion individually. That's also why there aren't many items on the menu."

Just as Cohen had guessed, the ingredients were the ones Ryo-Ohki had been given as souvenirs from Jurai, prepared by Hakuren and the others.

"Delicious... Not as fancy as the pirates' stuff, but way better."

"Hey, hey, listen to me! Hey!"

Barry and Cohen were so engrossed in their meal they seemed oblivious to Alan's voice.

"Hey, hey!!"

No matter how much he yelled, Barry and Cohen didn't even glance at Alan. As the food gradually dwindled, Alan's anger slowly faded away.

".....Hey, hey! Save some for me too!"

Finally unable to hold back, Alan pushed past them and joined the circle of eaters.

"Whoa! What is this? It's too good!"

"Hey! That's mine!"

"Shut up! First come, first served!"

With Alan joining in, the three of them began devouring their food with incredible ferocity, like wild dogs fighting over scraps.

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NB stood in the captain's stateroom, having taken the form of Kirche. Before her, a three-dimensional image of Airi was projected through the a channel from Ryo-Ohki.

"I'm sorry to put you in such an awkward position."

"No, as long as Seina-san is safe, my own situation..."

"Without your decision, Ryo-chan might not have made it in time... no, it's doubtful we could have even made contact in the first place."

"...But I feel terrible for what happened to Alan-san and the others. I imagine Seina-san is also deeply troubled."

"They're just... incredibly lucky, aren't they? Anyway, given the utterly impossible extreme situation they were in, and under the pretext of a 'breakthrough operation,' it's been decided they won't be punished for their escape. So relax."

At Airi's words, Kirche let out a small sigh of relief.

"Still, even if they're not being punished, their attitude before this is the real problem... They'll need aptitude tests and retraining tailored to their results."

"What about Seina-san?"

"Even as captain, he was just a figurehead in charge of setting the course. We won't hold him fully responsible. In fact, his ability to navigate this situation will likely be highly praised."

"I see. Well, that's good then..."

"Actually, we're compiling the data from this incident and running simulations to see what results it yields when compared to the data of all GP's A-class captains."

"So... what were the results?"

"We only have about ten cases with results so far, but everyone else dropped out midway. Only one S-class test subject managed to break through."

"Then what about Seina-san!?" Kirche's expression brightened instantly.

The more evidence there was to spare Seina from blame, the better.

"Don't jump to conclusions. For the sake of the A-class captains' honor, I'll say this: in terms of skill and experience, Seina-kun doesn't hold a candle to them. It's only because he has Kiriko-chan and the others supporting him... But when it comes to being the crew's emotional anchor, he scores exceptionally high."

"So you're saying he's suited to be a captain?"

"Sorry. I can't really say he's suited for it."

"Huh? But earlier..."

"He performs at near-extreme levels. An ordinary crew couldn't endure that. It only works with highly trained crew like Kiriko-chan and the others. Besides, even this time, a routine test mission ended up like this."

"I-I see. That's certainly..."

Despite his great ability, he was held back by the vagaries of chance. The sheer futility of it nearly made Kirche lose consciousness.

"We still don't know what Seina-kun's future holds, but we'll need to gather more information for a while longer."

"Yes, I suppose so... By the way, even if Seina-san and Alan-san aren't punished, how should I handle this?"

"Externally, your actions will be attributed to an emergency countermeasure program I

implemented."

"Oh... I see... I'm sorry."

"Oh, not again! I knew it! ...It's just what you think. At this point, something like that wouldn't even surprise anyone, let alone make for good gossip. Ho ho ho! Little girl, don't underestimate a philosopher."

"I don't think it's something to brag about... Since I started hanging out with Airi-sama and the others, worrying over little things just seems silly now."

"Ohohoho. Well, I'm sure Seina-kun will just give up and accept it."

"Thank you for your concern. Another worry is that I revealed my true identity to the pirates. If this causes any problems, it might cause trouble for Seina-san. "

If fans found out he was personally monopolizing an idol, it would be disastrous. Especially since Kirche was currently missing, abandoning her idol duties could lead to contractual damages. If things went badly, all sorts of problems could end up piling onto Seina.

"Analyzing the situation, I don't think that's a concern. Revealing your true identity would simultaneously expose Tarrant's scandal. Unless they're complete idiots, they wouldn't risk their own lives. Well, in another sense, Seina-kun has earned even more resentment, but honestly, it feels like it's too little too late, ahahahaha~~"

"Don't be so carefree! Tarrant's obsession is beyond ordinary!"

"It's fine, it's fine! I've got a new charm now." Airi said in a cheerfully unconcerned tone, ignoring Kirche's unease.

"A charm?"

"You'll find out soon enough." Airi winked with a childish gesture and cut the communication.

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"Myaa, myau, myaa!"

"No, Ryo-chan. You have to wash inside your ears properly too."

"Myau! Myaan!"

"Hahahaha, that tickles."

"Truly adorable. Ufufufu"

The bathroom echoed with the cheerful, playful voices of Ryo-Ohki and Kiriko along with the seven other women.

The captain's quarters bath was about the size of a small pool, featuring a deep bowl-shaped tub roughly sixteen meters in diameter and ten meters deep. Various shaped wooden plates were arranged within it to adjust the depth and create washing areas. It felt like a giant traditional Japanese bath.

(...Why am I here?)

Listening to the women's excited chatter, Seina crouched in a corner of the bath, facing away from them. The reason for this situation was that, originally, he had been pestered by Ryo-Ohki to take a bath together. After that, Kiriko and the others had all come in at once. Apparently, Ryo-Ohki had invited everyone to take a bath, but naturally, Seina hadn't expected Kiriko and the others to be there, and Kiriko and the others hadn't expected Seina to be in there.

And the timing of their arrival was terrible. If Seina had been the last one in, he could have left at that point. But with Kiriko and the others coming in after him, Seina would have to pass right by them to get out. You might think he could just leave once they noticed him, but that was where the terrifying power of group psychology came in.

"Oh, then let's join you♡"

If Gyokuren started saying things like that, Amane and Elma would follow suit.

"Well, I suppose we have no choice,"

Hakuren and Suiren would say.

"Hey, you girls!"

Kiriko and Karen stepped in to stop them. But then,

"Myaa!"

...as if saying, "Come in with me," Ryo-Ohki grabbed his hand. There was no way he could shake off those adorable hands, so under the pretext of supervision, he ended up going in with her...

"What should I do...?”

While Seina pondered this, Ryo-Ohki leapt onto his back.

"Myaan! Myaa!"

"Huh!? You want to play together?"

Just as Kiriko had said, by that time, everyone could understand Ryo-Ohki's words.

"Well, um... how should I explain this?"

"...Myaa!"

"Huh? Does Tenchi-senpai's house have a big bath big enough for all of us?"

"Myaa!"

"What?! Really? Does Tenchi-senpai bathe with Ryoko-san and everyone else?"

"Myaa!"

"Wow... Tenchi-senpai is so mature."

Seina felt left behind somehow and slumped his shoulders in disappointment. But...

"Myaa, mya, myaa..."

"……Huh? Tenchi-senpai plays around with you a lot when you're alone, but when Ryoko-san and the others come, he turns into someone just like me?"

"Myaa."

"...Thank goodness. What a relief. Hahahaha."

As Seina relaxed, relieved, several shadows approached, submerged in the bathwater behind him.

"Myaa."

"Huh? So you always... what?"

"She says they drag him over here by force, like this ♡"

Amane, Gyokuren, and Elma burst out of the water, grabbed Seina, and hoisted him up like a palanquin.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

“Myan, myan!”

Then, Seina was carried toward the rest of the group. Meanwhile, Ryo-Ohki joyfully leaped around Seina's makeshift palanquin.

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"…That was quite an ordeal."

Seina was a healthy young man. He had an interest in women's bodies, of course. But with such a high ratio of women, the sheer tension was painful. Since starting Bio-Enhancement and living together at Amane's house for that full-blown training, how many times had he thought about taking that step?

(But still...)

He recognized they had feelings for him, but Seina believed it was merely sympathy. In truth, back on Earth, even with men, relationships were typically "more than strangers, less than friends" as the norm. The only people he could definitively call friends were Tenchi and Kai. For someone like Seina, a female ‘friend-with-benefits’ situation was a pipe dream, something he'd never even imagined. Kiriko was the exception, but even then, Seina himself wasn't confident whether his feelings for her went beyond sister-brother territory.

(Even this time, what did everyone think of me to do something like that? As a man? ...Nah, that's not it. Maybe they treated me like a kid, just like Ryo-chan? ...Yeah, that's the most likely possibility.)

After that, surrounded by the women and forced to play along with the Ryo-Ohki's game, Seina remained soaking in the bath the entire time.

Thus, having overheated and fainted from the bath, Seina collapsed onto the bed in the bedroom upstairs from the bathroom.

"Myaa"

For Ryo-Ohki, this state of Seina's was probably just business as usual. She was smiling and fanning Seina with a small hand fan.

"Ah, thank you, Ryo-chan."

"Myaa."

Beyond this heartwarming scene of Seina and Ryo-Ohki, outside the apple-shaped canopy, Kiriko and the others were radiating a somewhat tense atmosphere.

"Everyone drew their lots?"

At Kiriko's words, everyone nodded. They were currently drawing lots to decide the positions of the beds.

All of Kiriko's group wore the same negligee, but that was because Kiriko had claimed the nightwear each had brought. From sheer items to ones that were practically just perfume, their purpose was obvious at a glance—they looked like either newlywed brides or AV actresses. Ironically, Gyokuren's outfit turned out to be the most decent one. In the end, they all decided to wear the negligees provided by the GP. Even so, Gyokuren and Amane were undeniably provocative, thanks to their beauty and allure. But since everyone was wearing the same thing, it wasn't fair to give them an advantage. The other women would have to leave their fate to the upcoming lottery.

"Okay, let's open them all at once."

At Kiriko's signal, everyone opened their tickets simultaneously. In that instant, their expressions ran the gamut of joy and sorrow, creating a scene reminiscent of a professional baseball draft meeting.

——I’m being treated like a child, just like Ryo-Ohki.

Seina, who had come to that conclusion, listened to the commotion while vaguely thinking they'd all be sleeping together in a communal space from now on. Especially since Ryo-Ohki was present. Honestly, just having one child there made the atmosphere feel warm and cozy.

(Well, at least we'll get some rest now.)

Seina realized how naive that thought was when Kiriko and the others emerged from behind the tent after finishing their lottery.

"Huh!?"

The GP negligees were indeed loose-fitting and not overly provocative in design, but the soft curves of their breasts and the occasional glimpses of their legs and hips as they moved, combined with their beauty, possessed more than enough destructive power.

Seina frantically looked away, lying down facing his usual direction and trying to calm himself by looking at the Ryo-Ohki.

"Mya!"

Seeing Kiriko and the others approach, Ryo-Ohki immediately claimed the spot as her own, hastily lying down facing Seina. Of course, Kiriko and the others understood this was Ryo-Ohki's privilege as the organizer of "Everyone's Nap Time." Suiren took the prime spot next to Ryo-Ohki, facing Seina. Behind Seina lay Hakuren, followed by Amane, Karen, Gyokuren, Ryoko, and finally Kiriko, each settling into their preferred positions. Yet even as they lay down, Kiriko and the others kept a watchful eye on each other, making sure no one teased Seina while everyone else was asleep.

(Well, this is bad. How can I sleep like this!?)

Seina stiffened with tension at the peculiar atmosphere emanating from Kiriko and the others.

"Myaa."

Once everyone had settled into their spots and Ryo-Ohki decided she had secured her spot, she sat up and looked around with a look of joy. Sleeping together with a large group of people was strangely enjoyable in itself. However, even though Seto, Minaho, Funaho, Misaki, and many other ladies-in-waiting slept with her on Jurai, Ryo-Ohki missed Tenchi and the others, so she contacted Earth once a day and felt reassured when she saw Tenchi and the others.

"Myaa, myaa."

But strangely, she felt no anxiety at all while she was with Seina and the girls.

The moment Kiriko and the others saw Ryo-Ohki's happy face, their wariness toward the other women vanished, and the tension that had dominated the room instantly eased.

(Huh?)

Noticing this, Seina opened his tightly closed eye. And then, his eyes met those of the delighted Ryo-Ohki.

"Myaa?"

Thinking this was Seina's signal to lie down quickly, Ryo-Ohki swiftly flopped down beside him. Curling up close to Seina, Ryo-Ohki immediately began snoring softly.

With Kiriko and the others' tension easing and Seina completely relaxed by Ryo-Ohki's peaceful sleeping face, he sank into a deep sleep, overcome by accumulated fatigue. And as if it spread, Kiriko and the others also fell asleep one after another.

Seina and the girls slept for seven hours in the bedroom in the accelerated space, which equated to about three hours in real time. Approximately six hours after beginning hyperspace navigation, they arrived at the rendezvous where the escort ship from Jurai waited.

"Thank you so much, Ryo-chan. Give my regards to Tenchi-senpai and the others."

On Kamidake's bridge, Seina and the girls saluted the image of Ryo-Ohki displayed on the main monitor.

"Myaa!"

Waving to Seina and the others, Ryo-Ohki lowered the Kamidake from the compression bay into space.

"Myaooon, myaooooooon!" She let out a loud, joyful cry and instantly disappeared into hyperspace.

"Haa... It was only for a brief moment, but I truly felt that the legend of the Ryo-Ohki was real." Ryoko sighed softly, her eyes glistening as she stared at the space where Ryo-Ohki had vanished.

"They called her a legendary pirate, so I imagined something terrifying... but who would've thought she would be such an adorable kid?"

"According to the records left on Jurai, she was quite the violent force, but aside from fighting those who attacked her, she hardly ever assaulted cities."

"Wow, I want to see that record!" Ryoko practically threw herself at Hakuren, leaning in close. She looked ready to do a "sit," a "shake," or even a "roll over and bark" right then.

"If you go to the Central Library on Jurai, you can see it."

Hakuren struggled to gently pull away from Ryoko, who was rubbing against her. Then, a small vibration was felt on Kamidake, and Hakuren and Ryoko looked toward the monitor.

"Captain. The escort ship from Jurai has arrived."

Since Kamidake's hyperspace-related systems were still inoperable, the Juraian escort ship had jumped out to a position close to Kamidake to enable optical communications. The escort ship had been waiting in nearby space even before Ryo-Ohki arrived, but they had deliberately staggered the timing to make the relationship between Ryo-Ohki and Jurai seem as ambiguous as possible.

"Ah, that's...!?"

Kiriko's expression darkened instantly upon seeing the escort ship. It was like a child caught in mischief, and Hakuren and the others, who knew the situation, averted their eyes, stifling their laughter.

The Juraian ship that arrived was a lotus-shaped vessel accompanied by three smaller ships.

(It really is Honoka-sama.)

It was Tatsuki Ringo's Imperial Ship, Honoka, adorned in her official exterior.

Guided by optical communications, Kamidake entered the flower. As Kamidake docked, the petal-like structure slowly closed. The moment it sealed completely, the exterior scenery was projected onto a screen, as if the petals had become transparent.

"Seina-chan!"

Tennyo was the first to rush toward Seina as he descended from Kamidake, tears welling up as she hugged him. This caught Seina completely off guard. Kiriko, Tsukiko, and Kiyone were the ones who showed this kind of concern for Seina, but as Seina grew up, Kiriko and Tsukiko's expressions of it became a bit more restrained. But for Tennyo, her impression of Seina was probably still that of the child she hadn't seen in years.

"Are you okay? No injuries?" Like a mother dog licking her puppies, Tennyo checked Seina's body.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry for worrying you, Tennyo... san." Seina couldn't help sounding a little childish himself.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing. I know how unlucky you are, and I still put you on that crappy ship."

"Crappy? It was a multipurpose ship to begin with, so what can you do?"

Behind Tennyo, Masaki Hakuryo and Airi stood looking perplexed.

"Shut up! We should've made it a more special ship, one that could wipe out pirates in one fell swoop!"

"Tennyo-chan. But then we couldn't mass-produce them, could we?"

"It's because you go and think of unnecessary things like trying to lure in Da Ruma!"

"If only Elma had been a bit more careless..." Under Tennyo's piercing glare, Airi blurted out her true feelings.

"Huh? Me? ...Wait, so Kamidake was just a decoy for Da Ruma!?"

"Huh!? No way, that can't be true!"

Seeing Airi's awkward behavior, Elma—who had been by Airi's side for so long—realized Kamidake's true nature.

But at that moment, "As you surmised, Kamidake is a data logger ship for intelligence gathering."

Ringo, accompanied by Tōdō, Nene, and her attendants, emerged from the transfer gate and smiled warmly at Seina and the others.

"Whoa!"

The moment she did, a murmur of sighs arose from Alan and Ryoko's subordinates who had disembarked from Kamidake. Seina felt the same way. Even Seina, who had interacted with some truly exceptional women in his life, found Ringo incredibly captivating. She embodied the very essence of the delicate charm possessed by Kiriko and the others, as if they had all been gathered together and molded into human form. Moreover, Ringo's delicate charm wasn't something only men felt.

"Whoa! She's... adorable, isn't she?" Amane, meeting Ringo for the first time, reacted much like the men.

"Hehe. That lady is Tatsuki Ringo-sama, who led the Juraian side's search for Kamidake."

"Huh, Kamidake?"

Seina, who had been staring blankly at Ringo, looked toward Tennyo in surprise at those words. The moment he looked back at Ringo, his eyes met Ringo's smiling gaze.

"!!" Seina's heart began pounding like a drum.

——Yes, his name is Seina-chan.

It felt similar to what he had felt the first time Kiriko, who had come to pick up Kai, spoke to

him when Seina had stayed behind at kindergarten because the shop was busy and his mother couldn't come to pick him up. It wasn't the same kind of shock he felt with Amane or Gyokuren; it was more like a flutter.

Seina flushed and bowed deeply without thinking.

Tennyo, who had been watching Seina's reaction with amusement, nearly burst out laughing the moment her gaze shifted to Kiriko. Kiriko hung her head deeply, her face pale as a sheet, her legs trembling pitifully. It stemmed from an overwhelming sense of guilt over what she had done to Ringo before.

"Everyone, why are we standing here chatting? Please come this way."

At Ringo's words, the attendants turned toward Seina and the others and began politely assisting and explaining things to those they were guiding.

"...How... lovely."

At first, Alan and the others had hidden behind Ryoko's crew when they saw Airi's group. But the moment they spotted Ringo, they pushed past the crew and stepped forward.

"Hey, who's that person?" Alan asked Ryoko's First Officer.

"Tatsuki Ringo-sama. She's the one commanding this rescue operation."

"T-Tatsuki? Could it be...?"

"The Tatsuki family, part of the Imperial Family."

"I knew it! That Tatsuki family. The number one family I want to marry into!" Alan's expression shifted from surprise to a lecherous grin.

"Heh heh... The path to the Jurai Imperial Family has opened."

"Huh!?"

Alan's remarks often left them flabbergasted. Even Barry and Cohen found this one beyond comprehension.

"Seems you can't grasp my intent?"

"...No, before understanding your intent, I can't even comprehend what you're saying."

Alan began to explain to Barry and Cohen, who looked at him in bewilderment, with a look of utter superiority, looking down on them from above.

"Hmph... Listen up. We're the heroes who saved Jurai from crisis."

"Huh? When did we save Jurai from crisis?"

"Listen up. Why is the Imperial Family taking direct command? Because of Yamada Seina?

Kamidake? But Yamada Seina is just a GP crew member, after all. And Kamidake, even if she's Jurai's next successor ship, is still just a destroyer."

"Could it be... Seto-sama's package?"

"Exactly! Seto-sama's cargo! The package those pirates were chasing after so desperately! So what does that make us, who protected it? Heroes, right?"

"But even if that's the case, why is that the path to royalty? Isn't that a bit too much of a leap?"

"All I need is the right opportunity. Listen up! Princesses are born princesses. They didn't work their way up to being princesses. But I'm different. I worked my way up to being a hero! So, which is better... you get it, right?"

"Even if you say I should get it..."

"You're slow on the uptake. There's no way she wouldn't like someone like me, right? Well, I'm not expecting it to go smoothly right away either. But the current Juraian Emperor, married a commoner as his Empress, you know." Alan smiled confidently.

But Barry and Cohen were still skeptical. They didn't seem convinced by his explanation.

"Hmph... Well, actions speak louder than words. I'll show you some results before we even reach Jurai."

As Alan puffed himself up with confidence, Tōdō approached him.

"I am Tōdō, Chief Steward to Her Majesty Tatsuki Ringo." Tōdō bowed deeply.

Alan beamed at him, and Barry and Cohen looked at Alan with expressions of surprise.

(The Chief Steward coming to escort us... Hmph, is this sudden?)

"Alan-sama, Barry-sama, Cohen-sama, this way please."

Alan, walking behind Todo who was leading the way, had started skipping without even realizing it.

"Hey, wait up. We're heading to a different gate than everyone else!"

"This might actually be what Alan said!"

Barry and Cohen, beaming with smiles, began skipping along as lightly as Alan. However, they used a different gate than the one Seina and the others had used, and waiting at their destination was someone other than the person Alan had expected.

"Uuuhn. Sorry to keep you waiting, Ringo-chan." Alan, completely giddy, nuzzled up to the person and said that in a sweet voice.

And then, unbelievably, he put his hand on the person's shoulder and started groping their

back.

"Aaaaaaah, Alan... Hey, wait!"

Barry and Cohen recognized the person and froze, their faces turning pale.

"Huh? Ringo-tan looks surprisingly slim in person... Gah!!"

The man, covered in goosebumps from the Alan’s touch, finally couldn't take it anymore and punched Alan in the head.

"S-sorry, sorry! I got carried away seeing you... right?" Alan raised his face, enduring the pain, and only then realized the person wasn't Ringo.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh, it’s you, Ryan!!!”

Standing before Alan was Ryan, his former classmate who had trained Alan and the others at Kiriko's request. Without a word, Ryan suddenly grabbed Alan's belly fat.

"What's wrong with you?! What a shameful, flabby belly!"

"Ow! Ow! Let go, you brute!"

"...You’re pathetic!!"

Ryan released his grip and glared at Alan and the others.

"I read the report! Looks like your rotten core isn't going to change that easily."

"The escape wasn't our fault! That was the captain's responsibility!"

Without a word, Ryan displayed footage of Alan sticking his tongue out and flipping off the monitor camera during the escape.

"Th-that!"

"You idiot! That's why I told you not to do anything unnecessary!" Barry said tearfully to the stunned Alan.

"Even NB's actions were acknowledged by Airi-sama herself as being due to her emergency response program. Are you still going to insist it's the captain's responsibility?"

"Then it's Airi-sama's responsibility..."

"Shut up, you bastards!! Insubordinate speech toward superiors! Low execution rate of orders! Lack of principle, falling for sweet talk so easily! But what's most unforgivable is your utter lack of crisis awareness, consuming excessive amounts of food in that situation!"

"W-we were just exercising our basic rights!"

"Who is responsible for managing the quantity of general supplies?"

"Huh? ……Aaah!"

Various supplies were delivered to Kamidake, but daily necessities, general equipment, and foodstuffs for everyone except the captain and senior officers fell under Alan's jurisdiction.

"B-but it was to do the best job possible in that situation! It was an action taken precisely because we had the ship's best interests at heart!"

"Oh? So desertion was for the ship's sake too? What you discussed with those pirates... Airi-sama has no interest in prying, and the Captain has no intention of reporting it, but if you insist on asserting your rights, you'll have to fulfill your duties as well."

All actions during a mission are, by definition, subject to reporting obligations. If desertion was considered part of the mission, then every word and deed during it must be reported.

"If the Captain's NB was present, there should be objective information available."

"Heh heh heh! If that's supposed to be Airi-sama's plan, then ours is a plan to make the pirates trust us. You know what they say, fool your enemies by fooling your allies first, right? Ahahaha!!"

"For that, you'd need proof you knew NB's actions were part of the plan from the start. Without cooperation from NB, your actions—without authority to plan—are just arbitrary decisions."

"Huh!? No, that's..."

"Moreover, we know your negotiations failed because you exposed Kamidake and her crew to danger. So the excuse of emergency evasion doesn't apply in this case."

"Th-th-th-th-that..." Alan's momentum stalled completely.

Ultimately, the power of life and death lay with Airi. If it wasn't a joint operation with NB, then it was outright dereliction of duty.

"Don't forget your actions constitute first-class dereliction of duty. You're only being given leeway because of the special mission and circumstances. And they're even providing proper compensation for this mission... it's nothing short of generous! That kindness is so touching it brings tears to my eyes!"

"Well, we did what we had to do, so it's only natural," Alan muttered nonchalantly.

"...I'm starting to genuinely worry about your futures." Ryan looked at Alan and the others not so much with exasperation as with pity.

“You’re partially right, but that’s just your own naive self-evaluation. But it’s your employer who should be evaluating your work.”

"No way... you mean we're being fired!?"

"As of today, you three are relieved of your duties aboard the Kamidake and demoted to general trainees. From now on, you will train diligently under my command. That's all!"

"Regular trainees!? Why now!?"

"Because you've been judged severely lacking in aptitude. Ha ha ha! You're lucky, you know. At this point, you'd definitely be rejected even by GP Academy."

"Then... then what about the allowances attached to our pay!"

"Of course not! By the way, from now on, ten percent of your pay will go toward your debt."

"I'll sue you! I'll expose every last bit of this inhumane treatment!"

"Ah, I knew you'd say that. Airi-sama ran a simulation beforehand and predicted it."

"Huh!???"

"For causing significant damage to the GP, labor in an isolation correctional facility is unavoidable. Combining compensation and debt repayment, it's at best three hundred years. If you slack off like you do now, it could be as bad as five thousand years. Wahahahaha!"

An isolation correctional facility was a work camp where criminals sentenced to life imprisonment earned money for compensation to their victims. Naturally, you couldn't leave until you'd paid it all off.

"...What if we didn't have any debt?"

"I think the shortest term is thirty years?"

"Then I'll declare personal bankruptcy!"

"Ha ha ha! Didn't you hear before that personal bankruptcy doesn't apply? Either way, your debts are from personal wastefulness. Unless you have relatives or friends willing to take the hit for you, the result is the same. Wahahahaha! ...So, which will it be?"

At Ryan's question, Alan bolted toward Tōdō like a rabbit escaping.

"I... I risked my life protecting Seto-sama's belongings."

"I understand it's incorrect to say 'you personally,' but you were certainly one of the crew, yes?"

"Then I'm one of Jurai's saviors, right?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"As my reward, please pay off my debt!"

"Hmm? The transportation fees for the cargo were already paid to the GP at the standard

rate. And rest assured, the tokens of appreciation for you gentlemen have been entrusted to Ryan-dono." Tōdō said nonchalantly.

"Alan! You're buying me dinner for a while. Wahahahaha!" Ryan waved happily from across the room.

"No, no, you don't have to pay the full amount! Ninety percent, no, eighty percent..."

Tōdō shook his head quietly at Alan's words.

"Th-then, could you at least cover it for me?"

"You... you want to owe the young lady your debt!?" Suddenly, Tōdō's face drained of color.

"Y-yes. Preferably without interest..."

Such brazenness was, in a way, refreshing.

"No way!" Tōdō gripped Alan's shoulder firmly with trembling hands.

"You absolutely must not do that! If you must borrow money, it would be far better to borrow from the worst, most despicable loan sharks than to borrow from the young lady!" Tōdō's eyes were utterly serious, his face showing genuine, heartfelt concern for Alan.

And no wonder. She was the treasurer of the "Demon Princess of Jurai," the leader of the accounting unit mocked as the Hyena Corps, feared even by the dark ones. Borrowing money from a demon who could make even Seto cry was beyond sane. And if it was money she'd earned herself, that might be one thing. But someone who leeched off others and squandered money? To Ringo, that kind of person was an irreconcilable enemy. Alan was exactly that. There was no doubt the collection would be brutal. Unlike loan sharks, there was no law to protect Alan from them.

Overwhelmed by Tōdō's seriousness, Alan felt an inexplicable dread. Alan himself didn't realize it, but back when he was running from debt, he and his crew had encountered Ringo before. Terrified by her imposing presence, they'd fled.

"Do you understand now?"

"……"

Stunned, Alan nodded in response to Tōdō's question. Then, he was restrained by Ryan and his crew and taken aboard the training ship.

Tennyo, Airi, and the others remained behind with NB to begin investigating Kamidake.

The crew of the disguised container ship, leaving Ryoko behind, were escorted to the VIP reception floor within the accompanying escort ship. Ryoko and the remaining Kamidake crew were guided to a guesthouse in Honoka's residential district.

"Ringo-sama, we—" Hakuren said to Ringo as she guided them to the reception hall's grand room, stopping beside the entrance.

Originally, Hakuren and her team were ladies-in-waiting dispatched by Seto. Having reunited with Ringo, their superior, their primary duty was to serve under her in hosting Seina and the others.

"It's fine. You are still continuing your duties as Seina-sama's subordinates."

"But—"

"Seto-sama also instructed me to let you rest, and besides, if you do something like that, Seina-sama will feel uncomfortable." Ringo smiled gently and gestured for Hakuren and the others to enter the room.

They bowed deeply and followed Seina and the others into the great hall.

"Wow..."

The room was exactly as one would imagine Ringo's space to be, furnished with natural wood and soft pastel-colored decor. The petal-shaped, retractable ceiling was fully open, allowing the dappled sunlight from the World Tree to softly illuminate the room, creating a scene that felt just like a gentle spring day.

The residential areas of Royal Trees all fundamentally shared the same structure. At the center stood a colossal World Tree that anchored the space and managed all environmental adjustments. Beyond that, the landscaping was tailored to the partner's preferences. Typically, fields and orchards for food production, pastures for livestock, lakes and salt lakes inhabited by fish and shellfish, and food chain cycles involving birds and insects were established. Additionally, there were facilities for manufacturing clothing, medical facilities, and small machinery, ensuring that human life functions perfectly within the Imperial Ship.

Honoka was a fourth-generation model, but having been adjusted by Washu, it possessed capabilities on par with third-generation units. Consequently, its living quarters were quite spacious; when fully expanded, it could accommodate tens of thousands of people. However, as Honoka's adjustments were recently completed, the living quarters are not yet fully developed. While lacking the austere, ethereal beauty of Mikagami, it resembled a newly landscaped park.

"Please relax at your leisure until we arrive at Jurai. Should you require anything, please do not hesitate to ask. We will arrive in two hours."

After Ringo finished her explanation, Hakuren and the others, perhaps sensing the situation, promptly went outside for a walk.

Once they'd walked a short distance from the guesthouse, Karen took a deep breath and said, "Man... that was tough."

"If Kiriko-sama had just made a snide remark, it would have been easier to handle... But the

fact that Ringo-sama herself doesn't seem to think anything of it at all... that's what makes it so insidious, you know?"

"Like pushing against a door that won't open, or nailing jello to a wall."

"In cases like this, she's worse than Gyokuren."

"Heh. I'm not fond of people like that either. She's similar to Seina-sama."

"Well, it's just a matter of how much Kiriko-sama can endure... isn't it?" Saying that, Karen glanced toward the guesthouse.

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After seeing Hakuren’s team off, Ringo approached Seina.

"Allow me to formally introduce myself. I am Tatsuki Ringo of the Tatsuki Imperial Family."

"Ah, nice to meet you. I'm Yamada Seina, Captain of the Kamidake."

Ringo gestured for Seina, who had stood and bowed, to sit down, then took a seat on the sofa opposite him.

"Thank you for all your hard work this time. I wish I could have assisted sooner, but being young and inexperienced, I caused you much trouble, Seina-sama."

"Ah, no. It's something that always happens to me, so I don't mind. It was the other people who had a hard time, and in the end I couldn't do anything..."

"Did you try your best, Seina-sama?"

"Huh? ...Of course, within my capabilities..."

"That's what matters most. If Seina-sama had neglected the mission even slightly, you might not have made it back."

"That may be true..."

"Expanding what you can do is only possible because you returned safely."

A close examination of the Kamidake crew's records revealed that Seina's role was not as insignificant as he thought. At the very least, under those circumstances, not once did Seina show any sign of giving up. Of course, there was hesitation born of inexperience, but that was something the other crew could assist with. However, the resilient mental fortitude identified by Airi's simulation—the Kamidake crew's spiritual pillar—was a particularly noteworthy ability. And it was something Kiriko’s team and Hakuren’s team had also sensed. Kiriko nodded in agreement with Ringo's words.

"Thank you. I'll try harder."

"Yes, we're counting on you."

Seeing Ringo smile, Seina couldn't help but relax. Amane and Ryoko watched the scene with gentle smiles, though inwardly they felt incredibly frustrated.

(She really is a good person...)

A well-behaved puppy—that's the type Ringo was. It was obvious she had feelings for Seina. But putting the brakes on that was incredibly difficult. Even the slightest attempt would clearly make them the villain, and the guilt that came with it would be overwhelming. Ringo's unintentional, natural cuteness was, in a way, worse than Gyokuren's.

"She’s the same type as Mihoshi. Well, with Mihoshi, I don't feel guilty even when I give her harsh comebacks... but with Ringo, honestly..."

"It's fortunate Seina-san is so oblivious,"

"More like, Seina doesn't even register the thought that someone might have feelings for him."

Amane and Ryoko leaned close and whispered.

But even as Amane and Ryoko were whispering—Kiriko’s situation was even more pitiful. If a puppy you’d taken your frustration out on still came wagging its tail toward you without hating you, the guilt would be unbearable... Serious-minded Kiriko was already on the verge of bursting into tears at the slightest provocation.

"...Ah!" Ringo finally noticed Kiriko's state.

——It's not your fault, but sometimes you need to be the bad guy.

Ringo had been warned by Minaho about suddenly making someone burst into tears. But even when she sought advice from various people, they couldn't understand why she made them cry because there was no fault in Ringo's actions. Recently, however, she had finally become able to sense something like a precursor.

(Oh no! I'd better discuss it in another room!)

Ringo bowed to Seina and stood up, "Kiriko-sama, I have something to discuss with you." After saying this to Kiriko, she took her to an empty room.

"Um, Kiriko-sama... Wait, what!?"

Before Ringo could even turn to face Kiriko and speak, Kiriko clung to her and burst into tears.

"Kiriko-sama, I don't mind anymore, and I understand how you feel..."

But the more she tried to comfort her, the harder Kiriko sobbed.

(This is troublesome... I don't know how to be the bad guy.)

After thinking it over, Ringo decided to do what she always did: patiently wait for the other person to stop crying.

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"Come to think of it, I feel like Tennyo-sama was saying something utterly ridiculous while clinging to Seina—"

After Ringo and the others left, and the room had calmed down a bit, Amane stared intently at Ryoko and said, "...What did Ringo-sama mean earlier about the data logger?"

Seina asked the same question.

"Well... perhaps I should start from when I first became involved with the Kamidake?"

Ryoko explained in detail, from her final adjustments to Kamidake as Elma, to her doubts about Kamidake as Ryoko Balta, and finally realizing its true nature.

"...So Kamidake is a model for the actual ship that will be used?"

"No, the actual ship that gets built should be completely different. It's more like a hodgepodge put together just to collect data."

"Whoa, seriously? I thought it was a pretty impressive ship."

"Well, it actually is an incredible ship. Otherwise, they wouldn't have risked leaking information to the Da Ruma Guild. It's a groundbreaking vessel constructed solely from existing technologies. In that sense, it embodies the true essence of a Philosopher. After all, the study of Philosophy at the Academy involves considering the combined application and ethical use of various technologies developed there."

"...So Airi-sama isn’t just a pervert." Amane, arms crossed, said with an intensely serious expression.

"At least call her an eccentric."

"But Ryoko, you did a good job realizing it was a trap."

"Maybe it's because I had experience as Airi-sama's secretary."

"But couldn't we still use it now? That Kamidake data leak, I mean."

"That's a bit of a gray area," Then, out of nowhere, Tennyo appeared and interrupted the conversation.

"It's fine. Take your time." Tennyo said as they tried to stand up, then sat down next to Seina.

"I'm sorry, Seina-chan. Airi-sama really never does anything decent. But please believe me. This plan was hatched by Airi-sama and Seto-sama. The others only found out very

recently."

"No, it's fine. Everyone's safe, and that's part of the mission."

"You've grown so much... I'm so happy." Tennyo's eyes welled up with tears as she hugged Seina tightly.

"...Tennyo-sama, are you done with Kamidake now?"

"Seina-chan is more important to me. We can leave that to Airi-sama and Hakuryo. If you like, Elma-chan can go over there too. You're interested, aren't you?"

"Eh? Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't..."

"Right? Those two were practically dancing with joy. Well, no scholar could stay calm faced with that much data."

"What is it?" Seina looked at Tennyo curiously.

"A situation like that isn't something you can just create on purpose. And when it's a single ship, it usually ends up getting sunk. Right now, Kamidake is a treasure trove of data on the hull, navigation, ship handling, combat, and the crew's physical, psychological, and living conditions. If those three idiots hadn't been gorging themselves on food, we could've gotten even more proper data..."

"Well... it did become data on another kind of extreme situation, heh heh..."

"As captain, your attitude of protecting your subordinates is admirable, but it depends on the time and the degree. This time you survived, but in the worst case scenario, their actions could have cost the ship and the lives of the crew."

"That's my..."

"Seina-chan. Stop blaming yourself for everything. Overprotectiveness can sometimes make you a secondary perpetrator. What do you think will happen if they get assigned to other ships, never change their ways, and do the same thing again?"

"...I'm sorry."

"Speaking of which, what happened to those three?" Amane asked in a bright tone, trying to change the atmosphere between Seina and Tennyo.

"Oh, right! You didn’t hear? They were tested for their behavior and found that they fell below the standard for admission to the GP Academy. They were demoted to trainees." It was perfect timing—Tennyo, who had also felt she'd gone too far in her concern for Seina, jumped on Amane's topic.

"They fell below the admission standards!?" Seina seemed a bit surprised by this.

Amane and the others exchanged glances and nodded as if to say, "We knew it."

"Ever since I first met Seina-kun as Ryoko Balta, there was always this troublemaker vibe from them."

"Maybe we should disband that trio."

"Probably... And I hear that macho guy from their class volunteered to be their retraining instructor, so he's probably kicking their asses on the training ship right about now."

"Ah, you mean Ryan. True, he was actually pretty decent when they first started training under him, so I think he's the right person for the job."

"The question is how long it will last. They went back to normal pretty quickly last time, so we'll see what happens."

"Since they've been busted back to trainees, what happens to their debt?"

"They won't be forced into unreasonable payments, so it's up to them. But there's no sympathy needed. Word is they're using this achievement as leverage to ask Ringo-sama to cover their debt."

"Good grief, what a bunch of idiots."

"Their audacity is laughable at this point. But you refused, of course?"

"In the end, they apparently asked her to cover their GP debt interest-free."

"Ah, fools."

"Seriously... it's like going to the ultimate hell... hehe."

"Huh??"

Tennyo's expressionless smile sent a chill down Seina and the others' spines.

"We've gotten way off topic. Anyway, it looks like the schedule for Jurai's next flagship project is going to be moved up. We've gathered more data than expected from this incident, and above all, the fact that the new computer unit has started operating is a major factor."

"Right! What on earth was that? Seina and Kiriko said it looked like a Royal Tree..."

"I'm not an expert myself, so I don't know the details, but it seems to be modeled after the thought transmission structure of the Royal Trees. The AI construction seems different from anything we've seen before. What do you think, Amane-san?"

"This is just my amateur opinion, but it felt almost indistinguishable from Kiriko or me. It was incredible. If it had been operational earlier, we might have escaped without any help..." After some deep thought, Amane cautiously shared her opinion.

"Was it really that impressive!?"

"It can't replicate Seina's abilities, but it was like having another crewmember... no, since it doesn't need rest like us, maybe even more than that."

"That is truly incredible."

"You're being too modest. Copying Amane-chan and Kiriko-chan's abilities isn't something you can easily do. Anyway, since the situation has changed significantly, Kamidake's test will be reviewed. From here on out, it's going to be top secret."

"Well, with us, there's always the risk of information leaks, right?"

"Don't be sarcastic. It ruins your beauty, Amane-chan. As test subjects, you two are rare specimens. Normally, gathering this much data would be impossible. So from here on out, we'll just leave it to the specialized, meticulous folks."

"Yes, Onee-sama."

"Ahahahaha! Good girl, good girl." Tennyo smiled happily at Amane's response.

"Ringo, Ringo!" A faint, anxious voice like a child searching for its mother drifted over as Honoka fluttered in.

"Oh, Honoka-chan. Looking for Ringo-chan?"

"Ahh, Tennyo, Tennyo!" Relieved to see a familiar face, Honoka happily landed on Tennyo's palm.

Seina and the others watched her curiously.

"Ah!"

Noticing their gaze, Honoka quickly hid behind Tennyo. As a top-secret experimental subject, Honoka had previously been instructed not to appear in public. Seeing strangers still made her reflexively hide, a remnant from that time. But as a Royal Tree, Honoka fundamentally loved people. So, she peeked out from behind Tennyo with a look of keen interest.

"This is Honoka-chan. She's a Royal Tree terminal. Well, she's the same as Ryo-Ohki-chan."

"Tennyo, are these people Ringo's guests?"

"Yes, they are."

Tennyo gently stroked the hidden Honoka.

"...Hello." Honoka said in a nervous voice as she emerged from behind Tennyo.

"Hello."

Seina and the other two replied with smiles.

Royal Trees possessed advanced intelligence and abilities. It was easy for them to infer what emotions someone was feeling from slight changes in tone or expression, substances emitted from the body, or even physical changes like blood flow or brain waves.

"Hello, hello." Honoka noticed Seina and the others were fond of her and happily emerged from behind Tennyo.

"Honoka-chan. This is Ryoko Balta. Next is Amane Kaunaq, and then my younger brother, Yamada Seina-chan."

"Younger brother? Like Tenchi?"

"Yes, that's right."

"...Seina?" Honoka approached Seina with keen interest.

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In the large washroom, Kiriko was desperately checking in the mirror to see if her red, tear-stained eyes and nose were less noticeable.

"Looks like you're okay." Ringo peered over Kiriko's shoulder, smiling.

"I'm truly sorry for the trouble I caused."

"No, please don't worry about it..."

"What's wrong?"

Kiriko looked at Ringo curiously as she suddenly became tongue-tied.

"Well... Kiriko-sama, you might know this already, but I tend to make people cry. Minaho-sama tells me to be careful, but honestly, I don't understand why it happens. Of course, when it comes to accounting work, I can understand the reason..."

"Hmm... Well, how should I explain it...?" Kiriko couldn't think of a definitive reason either, but she still tried her best to choose the closest explanation.

"……I think it's probably the same as Seina-chan's bad luck."

"Seina-sama's bad luck?"

"Ringo-sama's timing in conversation is so perfect that it leaves me feeling like I'm wrestling with myself..."

"...Is that so?"

Kiriko felt herself drawn into Ringo's puppy-like eyes, filled with puzzlement. She shook her head vigorously, trying to shake off that temptation.

"Ahh, I'll just come out and say it!"

"Yes, please do."

"The princesses of the Tatsuki family are all so incredibly adorable. It makes me envious and frustrated. And it's not just their appearance—their personalities are unbelievably charming too. It makes me feel utterly disgusted with myself and overwhelmed with guilt over my own dark feelings!"

"……Am I cute?" Ringo stared at Kiriko in puzzlement.

Normally, whether it was acting or just being naturally clueless, there was usually some unnaturalness or unpleasantness to it. But that bewildered expression, tilting her head like a puppy, felt completely free of any unpleasantness. That was the Tatsuki family's special ability.

"Gah! You are cute! So much I could cry!!"

"……Huh, is that so……. But Kiriko-sama is cute too."

"What!?"

"I've been feeling that way, especially lately. When I first met you, it was like... you seemed somewhat soulless, like a doll. But there were times when I felt like your soul had returned, and it was always when you were visiting Earth."

"!!"

Ringo's remark hit Kiriko like a direct hit, causing her to visibly fluster.

"Ever since Seina-sama came to the Academy, Kiriko-sama's emotions have been so clear—your joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure. And when it comes to Seina-sama... hehe, you even do things like that to me!" Ringo said with immense delight, wrapping her arms tightly around herself as she spoke.

"So, that's why I'm cute?"

"Yes, it's adorable how you get so worked up over it♡"

"Aaaah!"

Ringo's words and expression once again left Kiriko weak at the knees. Her face flushed bright red from sheer embarrassment, and tears welled up in her eyes again.

Seeing Kiriko's reaction, Ringo covered her mouth with her hand as if to say, Oh no! But she quickly regained her composure and said, "More importantly, Kiriko-sama, we'll be arriving at Jurai soon. If you keep that look on your face, it'll be disastrous!"

"Huh!?"

"Because of Ryo-Ohki-chan arriving a little while ago, the ladies-in-waiting under Seto-sama's command are all incredibly hyped..."

Ringo hesitated to say more, but Kiriko understood perfectly.

"Ah!!"

Stimulated by Ryo-Ohki's adorable charm, the accounting unit's heightened excitement had intensified their affection for Seina, who had done them such a great favor, to an overwhelming degree.

"R-Ringo-sama! Please warn your subordinates to calm down immediately!"

"Well... I'm afraid I can't quite promise that~~..."

"Wh-Why!?"

"To be perfectly honest, I also want to repay Seina-sama for everything, and above all, there's the matter of Seto-sama's package this time."

"...Ah!"

Jurai, where they were heading now, had already entered an organized state of readiness for battle.

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Just as Ringo said, in the massive hall of the **maritime** city of Jurai, all of Seto's subordinates had gathered for a grand rally welcoming Yamada Seina.

"You all remember, don't you? That massive pirate suppression operation! The immense economic impact it brought to Jurai... no, to the Galactic Federation! Let us once again engrave upon our hearts the indescribable debt of gratitude that Jurai owes to Yamada Seina-dono!" On the stage, Seto was rallying her subordinates.

Yet her expression was more jubilant than theirs, her body trembling with excitement like a child on the eve of a festival, unable to contain her thrill.

"And now, overcoming hardship once more, he brings us great new blessings! What must we do to repay this debt...?" Seto paused there. She stared intently at the expressions of the subordinates gathered there.

"...You know what we must do, don't you?"

"Yeeeees!!"

At Seto's words, the women present shouted in unison. Their voices echoed throughout the hall, shaking it like an earthquake.

"Sorry, Kiriko-chan. I can't stop her anymore. Yeah, no way." From the shadows of the stage, Minaho muttered expressionlessly, as if escaping reality.

"You there, spouting enlightened nonsense! You're joining in too!" Seto waved to her

subordinates while pointing at Minaho with her other hand and yelling.

"Huh? Me too?"

"Minaho-chaaaaaan!" Misaki heard the commotion and rushed over, suddenly throwing herself onto Minaho's back.

"Aaaaaaahhhhhhh!! Wait, Misaki-sama?!"

"Ahahaha! This is getting lively!" Misaki jumped off Minaho's back and peeked into the hall from behind a door.

Just then, Minaho sensed someone else behind her and turned around.

"Funaho-sama, Azusa-sama!?"

There stood not only Funaho, but also Emperor Jurai—who normally despised being dragged into Seto's foolish antics and would never approach such a place.

"Funaho-grandmother, please stop!" Minaho immediately clung to Funaho, the one most likely to actually stop her.

"Hmm... But you know, I'd like to see Minaho-chan's baby soon too."

"Hmm, well, this might be a good opportunity."

“Wow! Things had gotten completely out of hand! Wait, are you just going to let that chaos continue? Didn’t you come here to put a stop to it?”

"I came to greet that fellow and see the ship that little one brought. Anyway, I figured I'd just say, 'I’ll leave the rest to you.'"

"Huh!? Leave the rest to me??" Unable to grasp the meaning of Azusa's words, Minaho tilted her head.

"What choice do I have? Yamada Seina-dono's achievements this time warrant treating him as an official state guest of Jurai. Naturally, in that case, I would be the host."

"Seina-chan's accomplishments since ascending into space are exactly as Seto-sama said, right? Yet, not being able to welcome him as a formal guest is truly heartbreaking... It's only natural to request the utmost hospitality, even if it's unofficial."

Even though he was granted special permission, Seina still hadn't been officially registered as a Galactic Federation resident. Even with precedent, the treatment of someone welcomed by the Empress of Jurai fundamentally differed from that of a regular GP Academy student. Moreover, Jurai's standing within the Galactic Federation no longer allowed for the kind of heavy-handed pressure it wielded during Funaho's time. It was hard to believe, but Seina’s current status was that of an early civilization specimen entrusted to Airi. Naturally, welcoming such a person as an official guest of Jurai would be problematic from a public relations standpoint.

"But if Seina-chan graduates from GP Academy, he'll be officially recognized as a resident of the Galactic Federation..."

"Hmm. When that happens, we must hold a grand welcome ceremony for him! Jurai cannot be seen as ungrateful."

"I understand your meaning perfectly well, but Seina-kun is still a minor..."

"I have heard many things about Seina-dono's character."

"Ah..."

Minaho looked uncomfortable and turned away, seeing Azusa's slightly troubled expression.

Kiyone was the one who knew Seina best. It was only a few years ago that Azusa and the Empresses learned that the missing crown prince, Yosho, was on Earth. Therefore, they remained unaware of the existence of Kiyone, their granddaughter. Investigating Seina would mean reaffirming those sad truths.

"Seina-kun is a good boy."

"Therefore, welcoming him as your husband poses absolutely no problem whatsoever."

"……H-husband?"

"Yes, husband."

"!!! No, no, that's jumping way too far ahead! Besides, Seina-kun has Kiriko-chan too..."

"If he were an ordinary boy, then yes."

"Huh!?"

"Despite possessing such extraordinary abilities, his soundly developed mind is anything but ordinary. But surely Kiriko alone hasn't been the only one supporting him?"

"Well..."

The people that supported Seina were everyone from the Earth Masaki family; Kiriko was merely the central figure. At one point, however, she was unable to bear the burden and ran away.

"The closer one is to Seina-dono, the more their spirit wears away... Of course, both he and those around him adapt and grow, but the problem is that his ability is the kind that triggers events. That isn't something that can be solved by personal growth alone."

"Looking at past events, it's impossible for just one person to stay close and support him. Indeed, even with Seto-sama’s four attendants, Kiriko-chan, and Amane-san—six people in total—they still couldn’t handle it this time. Of course, if he were to live quietly on Earth, I suppose there wouldn't be a problem..."

"But now that his ability is so widely known, those around him won't allow such a thing. They'll either exploit it or eliminate it. And if he himself doesn't desire that, then forcing Kiriko alone to shoulder the burden of that man's private affairs is cruel."

At Azusa's words, Minaho couldn't say anything and looked down. Just as a heavy silence settled over the room,

"...and that's the excuse that old hag over there uses to half-ass her way through things." Azusa suddenly shifted to a carefree expression.

"Huh? Ah? What?!"

"The old woman from Kuramitsu, Airi...Widow. I guess it's Seina-dono's bad luck that makes him popular with such troublesome people. That's what fuels that old hag's competitive spirit. Well, I guess she just doesn't want someone else to take her plaything."

"Such spiteful words. I believe Seto-sama thinks the more people who understand and support Seina-dono, the better."

"Isn't that just another way to evaluate the abilities of her subordinates? There are probably very few people, even among that old hag's subordinates, who can stand being around that kind of supernatural power. I feel bad for Kiriko, who is being used as a decoy."

"If that's how you feel, then stop it!"

“If we could stop it at this stage, nobody would have any trouble. As long as the spotlight doesn't turn on us, we're fine! It's a path everyone chosen by that old hag has to walk. Ha ha ha! For now, I'll just slip him a membership brochure for the victims' association.”

"Grandfather is also quite intent on bringing Seina-kun over to the Jurai side, isn't he?"

"Seeing that old hag's excitement, his future looks promising... no, there's no doubt about it already. It's only natural to want to acquire such talent. But unfortunately, Seina-dono belongs to GP Academy. If Jurai were to make such an overt headhunting move, it would cause all sorts of problems, wouldn't it?"

"...So you're saying it's fine if Seto-sama does it?"

"Well, yes. Besides... it's far better to rely on a promising minor than to pin your hopes on the Kanemitsu's having a boy."

"Ugh!"

That referred to the agreement that if the child born to Kanemitsu's wife, Yuzaki, was a boy, he would become Minaho's fiancé. Incidentally, the child born was a girl, so the deal was void.

"That's right, Minaho-chan. Even if Yuzaki-dono and you meant it as a bit of fun, it's an agreement that could determine that child's entire life."

Azusa and Funaho both pressed Minaho together.

"What!? Does that mean I'm officially joining the battle for Seina-kun too?!"

"Hehe, you should help Kiriko-chan. Seto-sama has the home-field advantage here, after all."

"Funaho, Grandmother..."

"Of course, you're welcome to join in too." Funaho said with a beaming smile.

"Hmm. Creating a fait accompli first might be a good idea. You needn't worry about the Royal Masaki family's reputation."

"That sounds more like the Masaki family, doesn't it? Heh heh."

"Either way, being that old hag's subordinate means no one's in a position to complain."

"So do your best!"

Azusa and Funaho delivered a flawless combination, relentlessly piling on the pressure.

"So... that's how it connects back to the original story?"

And so, amidst some confusion, Minaho's participation in the battle for Seina was decided.

"...Oh?"

When Ringo returned to the room where Seina and the others were with Kiriko, she noticed Honoka happily chatting with Seina. Normally, no matter how far away Ringo was, Honoka would spot her instantly and come running. But now, completely absorbed in her conversation with Seina, Honoka showed no sign of noticing Ringo at all.

"Honoka-chan"

"Ah! Ringo Ringo!"

Ringo called out, and Honoka finally noticed her. But unlike her usual self, who would have dashed over immediately, Honoka seemed hesitant to leave Seina. Still wanting to go to Ringo, she fidgeted awkwardly.

"Heh."

Ringo stepped toward Honoka herself and gently caught Honoka as she threw herself into her arms.

"Ringo Ringo! I was talking to Seina!"

Honoka, held in Ringo's arms, continued to fidget slightly, her excitement still not fully subsided.

(Ah, I see. She remembered me mentioning Seina-sama.)

Ever since Seina's mass pirate capture incident, Ringo had been elated about the improved financial situation and gleefully mentioned Seina's name at every opportunity. Honoka had heard all of it. That's why she had developed interest in and a fondness for Seina.

"Yes, that's wonderful."

Ringo waited until Honoka, who was being held, had calmed down a little, then said, "Everyone, thank you for keeping Honoka company."

She bowed deeply.

"Um, if I may ask a rather abrupt question... I haven't heard much about such terminal bodies existing for Royal Trees? Also, that crystal body... it seems to resemble the hull of the Ryo-Ohki we saw earlier?" Ryoko's scientific curiosity as Elma, combined with her reverence for Ryo-Ohki as Ryoko, overwhelmed her, and she couldn't hold back from asking.

"Ah, no! ...Of course, if it's something you can't discuss, that's fine."

"Well... In that case, on the condition you keep it confidential, I shall tell you. As Ryoko-sama surmised, Honoka is an experimental terminal created by Hakubi Washu-sama, the progenitor of Ryo-Ohki. This terminal body was made to observe the flow of Honoka's emotions."

"An experimental terminal?"

"Please forgive me for not elaborating on the details."

"Ah! My apologies!"

As Ryoko bowed her head in embarrassment, Hakuren and the others returned from their walk.

"Now, everyone, it's nearly time. Please proceed to the observation room."

Chapter Eight: To Jurai

Honoka jumped out of hyperspace just as the sun rose from beyond Planet Jurai.

Planet Jurai had a single huge continent, the entire landmass of which was covered in forests, and the rest of the planet was just ocean, with a simple landscape. However, as they entered the atmosphere and their altitude decreased, the surface, illuminated by the morning sun, revealed a breathtaking landscape.

"It's beautiful..."

The observation room's walls and floor were entirely screens displaying the outside view, making it feel as if they were flying through the sky. Honoka wasn't just flying toward their destination; she was taking a flight path normally reserved for special guests, one that should have warranted a nationwide welcome for Seina.

"Amazing... I've seen it on video, but I've never seen a tree that big."

The sight of flying low through a forest zone where trees stood nearly a kilometer tall was beyond Seina's wildest imagination. Suddenly, Honoka altered course, heading toward a forest area still untouched by the morning sun. The silhouettes of giant trees floating in the darkness, dotted with the lights of human life, resembled a gigantic Christmas tree. But the moment Honoka gained a little altitude, Seina was speechless at the view.

"That's Tenju."

Where Ringo pointed, a silhouette of overwhelming mass—one he couldn't immediately find words to describe—floated in the faintly brightening sky.

"……In space?"

It was as if a hole had opened up in the sky. It had a scale that easily surpassed even the World Trees inside Honoka and Mikagami, as if it was supporting the heavens.

Honoka slowly began moving along the outer perimeter, maintaining a steady distance from Tenju. From its silhouette in the backlight, Tenju gradually bathed in the morning sun, revealing its majestic form. The divine sight felt like the descent of a god.

"……Ah, ah."

Since going into space, Seina had seen many structures larger than Tenju. Yet no man-made colossus could rival the sheer power of nature's form. The sheer presence of what existed there was incomparable.

Seina forgot to breathe, transfixed by the mystery. But everyone present felt the same way.

"No matter how many times I see it, it fills me with awe," Ringo murmured with a sigh.

"Well, we should be going soon."

"Um..." Seina approached Ringo and whispered something under his breath.

"Understood. That's a good idea." Ringo clasped her hands together and answered with a sublime smile.

Honoka then picked up speed and headed towards the upper levels of Tenju, the realm of the royal family.

× × ×

Tenju was fundamentally both the seat of government and the Imperial Palace. The Masaki, Kamiki, Tatsuki, and Amaki families each held inviolable domains within it. Minaho was conducting a top-secret meeting with Kanemitsu in the Masaki domain.

"I see, so this is the participant list... Well, this is quite serious."

Kanemitsu extended the monitor displaying individual profiles all the way to the ceiling of the conference room, folding his arms as he studied it intently.

"That's right. Kiriko-chan and the others are outnumbered. They couldn't possibly protect Seina-kun..."

"But that old hag. She's surely factored in Minaho asking me for help, too."

"She's probably anticipated our countermeasures too."

“Hmm... I see. So she's planning to switch to the Special Operations Unit while she still can. Now that the budget issues have been resolved, the Accounting Unit will have some breathing room. Just the sort of thing that old hag would come up with. So, how do we counter this?"

"I have an idea. Please handle your preparations, Uncle."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I get why you're worried about Azusa. If you keep cleaning up after that damn old hag, you'll never find a good match." Kanemitsu's eyes held the same look as Azusa and Funaho had at the farewell party.

"But even so!... I mean, this conversation is probably going to end up the same as it did with Grandfather, right?"

"Hah, it's the quickest way to protect Seina-dono, after all."

If Minaho, a member of the Imperial Family, declared her intention to marry Seina, the

Imperial Marriage Council would be activated. All approaches to Seina would then be prioritized for Minaho. Naturally, everything Seto was trying to do would be frozen.

"I'm talking about Seina-kun's feelings! I certainly understand what Seto-sama and Grandfather are saying, but... at least at the beginning, with Kiriko-chan... Besides, if I leave, she might withdraw."

"Isn't that more Kiriko-kun's problem than yours?"

"That's why I want to buy her a little more time."

"I see. Well, we'll do what we can. But judging by the candidates, I don't think any match that will leave Seina-dono with regrets... including yours."

"Uncle!!" Minaho shouted, her face flushing bright red, but she didn't seem the least bit reluctant about becoming that way with Seina.

"In Seina-dono's case, it's certainly true that the more people supporting him, both publicly and privately, the better." Kanemitsu laughed and quickly made his escape.

Honoka arrived above Tenju and opened the petal-shaped gate of the hangar. From within, Kamidake slowly ascended and began flying toward the special port in the Royal Family's shared domain.

“I want to let her see this mission through to the end,” Seina pleaded with Ringo.

Kamidake descended slowly, following guidance toward its destination port. Tenju resembled a table coral in shape. Its densely woven vines and layers of accumulated leaf mold served to store water despite its treetop location, even harboring a massive lake. A diverse array of plant communities coexisted, creating a landscape reminiscent of the ground. Not all of the table-like treetop was covered in leaf mold; sunlight filtered through the canopy, and droplets of water could be seen falling.

"Still, it's hard to believe something like this formed naturally..."

"It's not natural, Captain."

"Huh!?"

"Tenju is the progenitor of the Royal Trees, another form of Tsunami-sama, and something like a world tree supporting the living quarters of the Imperial Ship."

"So, that means it was created by the Royal Trees?"

"Yes. That's why the entire environment around Tenju, all the way to its summit, is controlled, including gravity."

"I see. Normally, something this huge would collapse under its own weight, and ten

kilometers up, water would freeze solid... Huh?" At that moment, Seina noticed something off about the ground.

"Hey, Kiriko-san. There are gaps here and there on the ground where trees aren't growing... It feels a bit unnatural, doesn't it?"

Of course, within the continent, there were places like mountain ranges where trees didn't grow. But the gaps Seina found odd were spots where no giant trees grew, even though nothing hindered their growth. They looked like insect-eaten holes.

"Those are battle scars from when the first Ryo-Ohki invaded Jurai about seven hundred years ago."

"What? Ryoko-san told you that?"

"Trees have been planted in the destroyed areas, but it'll take another thousand years for those scars to fade."

"Honestly, I thought it was somewhat exaggerated too, but seeing these scars made it real for me."

"Still, what an incredible scar."

The largest hole was over ten kilometers in diameter.

"But even a GP battleship could handle destruction on this scale. They probably held back quite a bit during the fight, didn't they?"

"Whether it's Ryo-Ohki or an Imperial Ship, if they'd fought seriously, they could easily destroy even a star."

"Kiriko-san, if they held back, did Ryoko-sama have some purpose?"

"Until we asked Ryoko-san herself, it was just speculation, but apparently the goal was to capture the founder of the Royal Trees, Tsunami-sama."

"Heh. I never imagined a historical mystery would be solved like that."

"Captain, we've acquired the guidance beacon. What are your orders?"

After reporting this, Hakuren turned to Seina one last time. It meant whether to go with auto or manual.

"Since it's the last one, Captain."

Amane smiled and winked at Seina, who nodded in response.

"Then, manual landing, please."

"Roger!"

Guided by the beacon, Kamidake flew toward Jurai Port, its screen displaying the view below. From a distance, it hadn't been apparent, but man-made structures were scattered throughout Tenju, skillfully integrated into the landscape. One reason these structures weren't conspicuous was that they were all made of wood.

"Since the spaceship is made of wood, I'm not that surprised... but everything really is made of wood, huh?"

"Wood is just the raw material. Once processed, it poses no strength issues whatsoever. Besides, Jurai has such a diverse array of trees and giant woodlands. Wooden structures probably suit the landscape better. I was surprised the first time I saw it too, so I understand the captain's feelings."

"But Jurai has this truly mysterious beauty... It's almost hard to believe people actually live here..."

"That's probably because Jurai is a colonized planet." Hakuren said as she projected visual data onto the monitor.

"Colonized?"

"Yes. The Juraian people didn't evolve here originally; they came from another star. Naturally, they possessed interstellar travel technology at that stage, and Jurai also had intelligent life called Royal Trees. So, from the start, the city was built with environmental consideration and unified planning. That's why it lacks the inherent chaotic feel, which is probably why you feel that way."

"The lower levels of Tenju or the outer city are quite lively, you know. If you have time, I'd be happy to show you around?"

"That sounds good. I'd definitely appreciate it then, Gyokuren-san."

"Gyokuren as a guide!? Hold on! Where do you plan to take the captain?"

"Captain, we're approaching the landing site." Kiriko's voice cut in

Karen and the others stopped talking, focusing on their tasks.

"Landing site confirmed! Prepare for landing."

It was a textbook-worthy landing, so flawless it could be used in manuals. While not flashy, it was as quiet and smooth as a feather settling, so gentle that even with inertial control disengaged, the impact was barely noticeable. It was a masterful technique that even the port controller couldn't help but admire.

As soon as Kamidake landed and came to a complete stop, Jurai's burly warriors lined up on both sides of the passageway. Further along the passage, about twenty women dressed differently from the usual court ladies stood in a single row. Their flawless movements, bearing, and aura made it immediately clear that these were not ordinary warriors or court ladies.

"No way!?"

Led by Seina, Kiriko and Hakuren, who had disembarked from the Kamidake, stopped in their tracks, their expressions tense as they looked at the faces of those present.

"What's wrong, Kiriko? Is the welcoming party that impressive?"

"They are! The fighters are the Imperial Guard, and not just one, but all four Imperial Houses' guards are here. And the one standing at the very back is..."

Kiriko glared at Amane's nonchalant tone, her words catching in her throat as if she found it difficult to speak. Then, Hakuren continued the explanation in Kiriko's place.

"Also known as the Senior Ladies Association. They are the ladies-in-waiting directly under Seto-sama, and from among them, those who have been specially selected." **(TN: お局 is a women who has been with a company for a very long time, usually the office tyrant! 様 (sama) is just the cherry on top that makes it derogatory.)**

"The Senior Ladies, huh..."

"In this context, 'senior ladies' doesn't refer to unmarried women, but to those who have lost their husbands or been divorced after marriage. They are especially skilled in intelligence gathering and serve as an operational force."

That implied roles akin to spies, carrying out illegal activities.

"I see... So they handle nighttime entertainment and such too."

Amane, inferring from Kiriko's demeanor and Hakuren's words, whispered while looking at the senior women. As if affirming her words, Hakuren silently gave a small nod.

"All four Imperial Houses' guard units plus the Senior Ladies' Association... That just shows how important the package Seina's carrying is."

【Hey, you two, how long are you going to keep chatting? Don't embarrass Seina-kun like that.】

Upon receiving a secret transmission from Airi, who had remained behind in Kamidake, Kiriko and the others quickly straightened their backs and looked forward with serious expressions.

"Our apologies. Let's proceed, Captain."

Although they were a little taken aback by the elite group that had come to greet them, Kiriko and the others were all used to behaving in such situations. Amane was originally a top model. Ryoko was a pirate who had risen to the rank of Da Ruma Guild executive and also served as Airi's secretary. Kiriko and Hakuren, like the Senior Ladies, were also ladies-in-waiting in Seto's elite unit.

Kiriko and the others positioned themselves to make Seina look as impressive as possible,

then began walking in step with his pace. Perhaps their shared determination not to embarrass Seina synchronized them, for the group possessed an elegance that matched those already present. But above all, Seina's dignified stride doubled that elegance.

(Huh, Seina's got some style.)

Amane was inwardly impressed, but there was a reason Seina walked so confidently.

——It's an important package, after all. I have to carry it properly.

Well, Seina's composed demeanor stemmed from his belief that this grand welcome was directed not at him, but solely at the package.

Kong! Kong!

As Seina and the others began walking, the warriors struck the ground several times with their long staffs, initiating a ceremonial gesture.

【This is the ritual for the return of royalty and the Imperial Family. What do you think, Kiriko-san?】

【...It must be for that package. That's the only way to interpret it.】

【That likely explains why the four Imperial Houses' guard units appeared as well.】

While conducting their secret communication, Kiriko and Hakuren kept their gaze fixed straight ahead, maintaining their posture as they followed behind Seina.

When they reached the senior officers' unit, the two in the center stepped toward Seina. Simultaneously, Kiriko and Hakuren took a step back from Seina, knelt on one knee, and bowed deeply. This was their salute to the senior officers, their superiors.

"Yamada Seina-sama. Thank you for your long journey." The two ladies-in-waiting bowed deeply to Seina.

【Kiriko-san. Since you are on duty, please follow as part of the Kamidake crew.】

After briefly relaying this via secret communication, the two ladies-in-waiting began walking, leading Seina forward. The other ladies-in-waiting split to the left and right, bowing their heads in greeting until Seina and his group had passed. Then, in pairs on each side, maintaining a fixed distance, they fell into step behind him. Escorted by the fighters' farewells, Seina and his crew boarded a large open-top bus.

The bus drove through a nature park with a forest of towering trees, perhaps fifty meters tall, fields of flowers, small ponds and streams, with butterflies and birds he had never seen before fluttering about. What was truly spectacular was the way the branches of Tenju itself, some reaching hundreds of meters in length, stretched out above the forest. What set them apart from other trees was not only their size, but also the fact that, being Tenju

branches, they grew at an angle.

(Giant trees growing at an angle... it feels really strange...)

But looking further into the distance, the angle of other branches, slightly hazy, confirmed the giant tree before him was Tenju.

At that moment, one of the senior staff members suddenly approached Seina and placed her hand over Seina's.

"...I'm so relieved you're safe."

Seina recognized the senior officer's voice. And so did Kiriko.

"Aunt Tsukiko!?"

"Mom!?"

Right before Seina's eyes, the senior staff member removed her hood. Seeing her face, Seina and Kiriko cried out simultaneously.

"Really, I'm so glad you're safe."

Tsukiko, who had been staring intently at Seina's shocked face, suddenly softened her expression. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes as she gripped Seina's hand tightly.

"M-Mom... Why are you here!?"

Wiping her tears at Kiriko's question, Tsukiko kept one hand clasped around Seina's while turning to face Kiriko.

"I'm a Qualified One too, you know. More importantly, I'm so glad you're safe too, Kiriko... You did well protecting Seina-chan."

"Huh? ...Oh, I'm sorry... I worried you."

Tsukiko gently stroked Kiriko's cheek, and Kiriko looked down shyly. Tsukiko placed a hand on Kiriko's shoulder with a satisfied look, then turned toward Amane and the others,

“I'm Masaki Tsukiko, Kiriko's mother. Thank you for taking such good care of Seina-chan and Kiriko.”

Tsukiko bowed deeply to Amane and the others.

"The pleasure is ours. Kiriko has been a great help with the housework..."

Amane and the others rose from their seats and returned the bow.

"Hehe. We'll take care of everything here in Jurai, so please don't hesitate to let us know if you need anything." Tsukiko bowed once more, pulled her hood over her head, and returned to her original position.

“We just got caught in the middle of a heated argument. It’s better than what happened to me, right?” Amane nudged Kiriko, who was looking down in embarrassment, as she spoke.

"That's true... but it's still embarrassing."

"When your parents greet your friends or coworkers, it's just... indescribably embarrassing. ...But seriously, Kiriko's mom looks just like her. Give it a few more years, and you could pass for twins, couldn't you?"

"Well... I won't deny it. Back when she was a student, Mom looked just like me."

(Come to think of it, sometimes Aunt Tsukiko and Kiriko-san look like they could be twins when I see them together...)

Seina listened to Kiriko and Amane's conversation while staring at Tsukiko's back.

(Hm?)

Just as he felt a subtle sense of unease about that back view, a massive tree came into sight ahead, and the bus entered the gate at its base.

After the bus departed, Kamidake moved to Honoka's hangar.

"Sorry for making you go through this twice."

Airi hadn't gone with Seina and the girls; she remained on the bridge with Tennyo, Hakuryo, NB on the bridge of Kamidake.

"Please don't worry about it. I understand Seina-sama's feelings perfectly, and I wanted to do the same for him." Ringo, visible on the monitor, flashed a satisfied smile.

"For Seina-chan, it's his first assigned ship, so his attachment must be especially strong. Men tend to have a strong attachment to their ships, after all..."

Tennyo turned to Hakuryo and asked, "What is it about them, I wonder?"

"I'm no psychology expert, so I can't say for sure... But way back when, tools were hunting gear or weapons, right? Meaning they were things to get food or fight off enemies—essentially, things that protected your life..."

"But treating them as if they have a soul is a bit much."

"Well, given the biological division of roles between men and women, it's been pointed out since ancient times that differences exist not only in the physical aspects but also mentally."

"Seto-sama says it's because the ship obeys his commands perfectly."

"I see. That might be a big factor..." Tennyo grinned as she stared at Hakuryo.

"Oh, we should disconnect the units soon." Hakuryo, the only man present, quickly lowered his seat and fled the bridge.

"Oh dear, he's run off."

"...Did I say something I shouldn't have?" Ringo looked at the empty spot where Hakuryo had been, looking a little uneasy.

"Don't worry about it, Ringo-sama. But... that ship might become a major rival."

"That might be true. Men with Imperial Ships have that sort of thing about them too."

"Well, good luck to you too." Airi said, glancing at NB.

The place Seina and the girls were brought to was pitch black. And for some reason, an apartment complex-style building stood there.

Ding-dong. Seina stood before the door and rang the chime.

"Kamiki Seto Jurai-sama, delivery!"

"Oooh, hello there! Thank you for your hard work ♡"

Seto's sweet voice came through the intercom. The door unlocked and swung open, revealing a young lady in an apron and a triangular headscarf.

"Um, could you please sign here?" Seina handed the package to Seto and activated the delivery receipt monitor.

"Hehe, just a signature? How about a thumbprint too?"

“.....”

"And boobs too ♡" Seto said as she enthusiastically winked at the silent Seina.

Just then, the complex's holographic projection vanished, leaving only the physical backdrop walls and doors.

As the lights came on, the luxurious hall of the reception hall appeared, along with the senior staff and Kiriko watching Seto silently from a distance.

"Hey! Why did you turn on the lights!? This is the climax of 'The Apartment Wife's Afternoon'!"

"Senpai... After all that trouble delivering the package, this is what we get?" Kiriko glared at the senior staff, her shoulders trembling.

The rest of the Kamidake crew, however, were left speechless by the baffling turn of events.

"Sorry, Kiriko-chan. We knew she was sneaking around preparing something... but we never imagined it would be this..."

"Honestly, this kind of joke is bad enough with just Airi-sama, right?"

"Even for Airi-sama, it's a bit of a stretch, but with Seto-sama, it feels way too off."

“I suppose so. If only she were the mistress of a shady Western-style mansion or the matriarch of a traditional family...”

"Heh, or a monster that devours young girls one after another?"

The senior staff who'd known Seto for ages delivered one mercilessly harsh comment after another.

"Either way, Seto-sama, with this ending, it ruins the whole emotional impact."

And finally, the senior staff leader delivered the finishing blow.

"Yeah, yeah! I'm a monster anyway. This role was supposed to be Minaho-chan's to begin with, so of course it's a stretch!" Seto puffed out her cheeks in annoyance and slammed the door shut.

Her blunt tone hinted at her close relationship with the senior staff.

"So you were aware of it. Though, even saying that, you seemed pretty into it."

"If Seina-dono were just five years older, it wouldn't have been a problem!"

"Come to think of it, I don't see Minaho-sama anywhere."

"Don't change the subject! Fine! What if he were at least ten years older?"

"Even then, I think the young lady should give up."

In terms of appearance, Seto also gave the impression of being in her early thirties, like Airi. But up close, her skin was fine-textured and firm, like a teenager's, with not a single wrinkle in sight. It was simply her composed features and dignified presence that gave the impression of being older.

"Yes, yes, my apologies. Ah, but getting back to the point, Minaho-chan ran off. Well, she's probably scheming something somewhere."

"So the farce ending midway was Minaho-sama's doing, then?"

"I’m sorry for the farce!"

Just as the voices of the senior staff and Seto could be heard beyond the door, the other senior staff began moving the backdrop walls.

"...Phew."

By the time the walls were removed, Seto had already changed into formal attire. Seina breathed a sigh of relief that the strange atmosphere had dissipated...

"Seina-dono... I'm sorry for showing you such an unsightly side of me." Seto said solemnly, though her expression held a hint of displeasure.

"Oh, no. It's not that it doesn't suit you at all, it's just that it's too provocative for me... I think that suits you much better!"

Seina's words came from the heart. Even the most beautiful woman had things that didn't suit her. And even the cutest girl had things she couldn't pull off.

"Oh, how delightful. You've grown so much to be able to say something like that."

Next to Seto, who was smiling brightly, the senior female staff members sighed.

“If he were under Airi-sama or Mikami-sama, he’d have no choice but to learn, wouldn’t he… Poor thing.”

“And on top of that, if he were to become Seto-sama’s favorite…”

"It's a thorny path, isn't it?"

"Damn! Anyway, we've received our package safely, so let's let Seina-dono and his crew take a break until lunchtime. Who wants to guide them?"

Despite Seto's words, spoken while feigning calmness but with a vein throbbing in her temple, the senior maids showed no sign of flinching. Instead, they all raised their hands energetically at once.

"Ooh! As popular as ever. Hmm... Now, who should it be?"

"Masaki Tsukiko-san, please!" Kiriko, shouting loudly cut Seto off.

"Eeeeeh? Well, that's fine... But then, at least one more..."

"Masaki Tsukiko-san, alone, please!" Kiriko glared at a disgruntled Seto.

“Masaki Tsukiko, by herself, please!!”

Faced with Kiriko, who radiated an intimidation level equal to Seto's when it came to matters involving Seina, the senior staff unit was no match. All the senior staff who had raised their hands sensed danger and hurriedly lowered them.

"Well, I suppose there's no helping it... Tsukiko-chan, you take care of Seina-dono. Amane-chan and Ryoko-dono, each of you take two people. Kiriko-chan and Hakuren, you two come with me for the situation report." Seto sighed then saw Seina and Tsukiko off.

"We don't mind being with Seina either, though?"

"You'll need to change into your formal attire first."

"Ah, I see. See you later, Ryoko."

"Yes."

Amane and Ryoko headed toward the transfer gate with the two senior maids assigned to them.

“After all the trouble I went through to gather such attractive, skilled ladies...”

"Please spare me your unnecessary concern!"

"That's not going to fly!"

"Huh!?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected retort, Kiriko looked at Seto in surprise.

"Seina-dono has faced all sorts of troubles up until now. From natural disasters to attacks by malicious individuals... But as this incident shows, his ability to deal with them is at an exceptionally high level. And that's something he’s cultivated since childhood, isn't it?"

"So... you mean there are situations he gets involved in precisely because he's an adult?"

The two great instincts of humans—no, of animals—are the instinct for individual preservation and the instinct for species preservation. The desires representing each are appetite and the urge to reproduce. Appetite is necessary from birth, but the urge to reproduce comes after the body matures. Both are difficult to control, but where Seina's experience was extremely lacking was in the urge to reproduce.

“Until now, Seina-dono's ill fortune was treated as something harmful, causing many to keep their distance. But once people realize that ill fortune could bring immense profit, many will come closer. In the past, those who approached Seina-dono invariably did so with goodwill. But now, those with ill intent come disguised in the cloak of goodwill, bearing gifts with ulterior motives attached."

"Heh, are you referring to Seto-sama?" Gyokuren, who had been observing the situation until then, spoke with a hint of sarcasm to Seto, who was trying to justify her actions.

"Heh heh, well, if you change your perspective, I suppose that's true. But the influence Seina-dono's power has on this world is beyond imagination... Therefore, if we don't take appropriate measures, it will be a problem."

"I understand what you're saying, Seto-sama, but I feel like it's too early…”

"It's precisely because of your attitude that this is so troublesome. Do you even understand what Seina-dono's bad luck entails?"

"Seina-chan's bad luck?" Kiriko tilted her head, not understanding the meaning of Seto's question.

"Perhaps it would be better to say bad luck for Seina-dono."

"Could it be things Seina-sama dislikes?" Hakuren answered Seto without a moment's hesitation.

Kiriko and the others all gasped in surprise and turned pale. The reason Seina attracted pirates was because he saw pirates as something "bad." Naturally, if that position were to change, the Galactic Federation would become evil.

"Exactly! What constitutes trouble is subjective. Naturally, the nature of the trouble drawn depends on Seina-dono's position and perspective... or rather, it could change. We'll need to conduct various experiments to confirm this going forward..."

"It's like... treating him as a weapon."

"Don't make that face. You're far too pessimistic about Seina-dono. It's better to say that Seina-dono is, above all, a combat asset. Either way, to pirates, he is a weapon." Seto smiled as she gently placed both hands on Kiriko's cheeks, turning Kiriko's face toward hers. She gazed intently at Kiriko with gentle eyes,

"Weapons are discarded when they're no longer needed. That's precisely why we must find a way to control Seina-dono's ill fortune now. To grant his wish, it's necessary, isn't it?"

"Seto-sama!?" Kiriko recalled their previous argument with Seina about whether to return to Earth.

——I want to stay in space. If I miss this chance, I'll never get another... I want to board a spaceship, go to all sorts of places, and see all kinds of things!

If Seina's bad luck became unnecessary, he'd likely be isolated somewhere like radioactive waste. But that would rob him of his hopes and dreams. Yet if we could control his bad luck...

"You seem to understand now?"

Kiriko gave a small nod to Seto's question. Still, she couldn't fully accept it right away.

"But Seto-sama, isn't inciting your ladies-in-waiting a bit excessive?" She looked at Seto with pleading eyes.

"...Ringo-chan, did you spill the beans? Then would you like to do it?"

"Whoa, me!?"

"Minaho-chan is also insisting that at least Kiriko-chan should have his first experience. What do you think?"

"W-what do you mean? I'm not... mentally prepared..."

"If we wait for that, who knows how long it'll take? Unfortunately, Seina-dono's position no longer allows us to wait. Back on Earth, he'd have time for emotional maturity and to find ways to communicate physically. Hey, what about you girls? Gyokuren-chan excluded, of course." Seto looked at Hakuren and the others with the same cheerful expression she'd worn when goading the ladies-in-waiting.

"Why am I excluded?"

"That's the right call." Karen couldn't help but interject

"Oh? So Karen will do it then?" Gyokuren smiled at her.

Seto also turned her expectant gaze toward Karen. Meanwhile, Hakuren had already slipped into a thought loop, and Suiren, flushed bright red and hid behind Hakuren.

"Ah... um..." Karen, clearly conscious of Kiriko, and looked away, her face bright red.

"No one else wants to volunteer... huh? Then why not leave it to the senior members? They're good at teaching."

"The senior members? No, but!"

"Sex, no matter what anyone says, is a skill, just like vocabulary and grammar. What matters is the words and the conversation, not the individual words or grammar. Besides, if two first-timers get all worked up and then mess up, the disappointment will be huge because their expectations were so high. Especially in Kiriko-chan and Seina-dono's case, they might blame themselves and end up not being able to continue afterward."

"Th-that..."

"Hey, Kiriko-chan. If you absolutely want to be Seina-kun's first, you'll need proper training."

"What!?"

"Seto-sama, that's—" Karen cut into the conversation abruptly.

The training Seto referred to wasn't simulated sex between synchronized personal avatars, but the real thing.

"Hmph."

Seto approached Hakuren and tapped her head lightly with the fan she held in her hand, bringing her back to her senses.

"It's difficult to teach someone without actual experience. You understand the difference between knowledge and practice, don't you? Now then... which would be better? Seina-dono being your first, or you being Seina-dono's first?"

Kiriko and the others began to seriously consider Seto's question, but…

"Hehe, without even thinking about it, I'd be happier if I gave my first time to him." Gyokuren answered immediately with a chillingly seductive smile.

"...Huh??"

Everyone, including Seto, looked at Gyokuren with puzzled expressions.

"Oh? I'm a virgin, you know."

“Whaaaaaaaaat?!”

Everyone let out a collective gasp of shock. Their expressions screamed, "This is the most shocked I've ever been in my life!"

"...Oh, how rude. But you understand, don't you? The reason we must be 'that'..."

Gyokuren glanced at Hakuren and the others, smiling as she flicked her tongue out slightly. The moment she did, the atmosphere in the room shifted.

“Damn it!!”

It was a sensation Gyokuren had long forgotten since she had begun to take Seina seriously. Even Hakuren and the others felt their intense sexual senses stimulated by Gyokuren's expression and aura alone. If a man was present, it wouldn't be strange if he came just from that.

“Not a single person has ever gone beyond just touching and kissing.”

"Ah, you... you did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Of course♡" Gyokuren smiled brightly, and the atmosphere that had enveloped the room vanished like a lie.

"...Maybe I should just ask Gyokuren-chan after all?"

"N-no way! That's just like drugging him with some shady concoction!"

"How rude. I wouldn't do something like that out of the blue." Gyokuren frowned and looked at Kiriko.

"So, you'd do it eventually!?"

“It means I can make it so that no one but me can sense it, even without using something like that.”

"Hmph!?"

"Hey, don't get sidetracked! If you don't want to leave it to Gyokuren-chan, then what are you going to do? Everyone won't keep waiting for you forever, Kiriko-chan." Seto grabbed

Kiriko by the collar and forced her to look at her.

"Th-that..."

"You have 30 seconds to think!"

"Huh!?"

"Okay, ten seconds gone." Seto pulled a watch from her pocket and began counting.

"No, no! Wait a moment!"

"Twenty seconds gone, ten, nine, eight..."

"Aaaaaaaaaah..." Kiriko was flustered and floundering under the merciless countdown.

Tsukiko took Seina to a place that looked like a Japanese garden that had been turned into a room. Water bubbled up from the bottom of a small pond, and a stream flowed out of it, making a soft splashing sound and seemingly flowing away somewhere.

"You don’t have to change your clothes, but wouldn't it be easier to take off your shoes?"

Following Tsukiko's prompting, Seina removed his shoes and entered the room. The moss-like plants covering the floor were softly cushioning with just the right amount of give, feeling pleasant against his bare feet.

"Now, sit down and relax. I'll make some tea... Oh, or if you're tired, would you like to sleep a little?"

"I'm fine. Everyone covered for me... Besides, I’ve rested properly and adjusted to the time difference."

"I see..."

Seeing Seina smile, Tsukiko suddenly changed her expression and collapsed into his arms.

"A-Aunt Tsukiko!? I'm sorry for worrying you... um..."

"I was worried... but more than that, I was frustrated."

"Frustrated?"

“Why was I here? Why wasn’t I somewhere where I could have died with you?”

"Huh!? Um, what do you mean?"

"Don't laugh, Seina-chan. I... I like you."

"...I like you too, Aunt Tsukiko...!!?"

As if to cut Seina off, Tsukiko kissed him. It wasn't a child's kiss, but one meant for an adult.

" Aunt... Tsukiko??"

"Honestly... I'm a bit surprised myself. When Kiriko went into space and chose a different path from Seina-chan, I thought I'd take Kiriko's place. But when you went to space and Kiriko accepted it, I was truly happy. As Kiriko's mother, and as Seina-chan's guardian..."

Tsukiko looked away from Seina and leaned in, pressing her forehead against Seina's chest.

"If not for this incident, I never would have realized how much I care for Seina-chan as a man."

Tsukiko's words made Seina's heart race. It was the first time in his life a woman had properly confessed her feelings to him. And it had been since childhood that he'd seen Tsukiko's face this close. He'd only ever seen her as Kiriko and Kai's mother, so he hadn't really noticed, but looking at her now, she was so youthful she could easily pass as Kiriko's older sister.

Before going into space, he might not have been able to accept such a confession. But now, possessing an unimaginably long lifespan, the standards for age differences had completely changed. A mere twenty or thirty years' difference? Even if the lifespan on Earth was eighty years, compared to two thousand years, it was little more than a year and a half – at most, the difference of one school year. In other words, it was more than enough to make his heart race.

(Oh, no!)

As various thoughts began to surface, Seina's tension steadily climbed. Tsukiko, who was more than sufficiently attractive as a woman, had confessed her feelings, kissed him, and was now pressing her body against his. Because he had thought of her as a second mother since childhood… No, precisely because he hadn't recognized her as a woman, it felt strangely fresh.

Seina tried desperately to pull away from Tsukiko, but she wouldn't let him. Noticing the changes in Seina's body, she seemed to relish the reaction, pressing herself closer.

"Hey, Seina-chan..."

It was just then, as Tsukiko said that and looked at Seina with flushed eyes, that Seina once again sensed something off about the expression on Tsukiko's face as she reached out to him. It was the scent of something akin to madness—something that lay deep within their very being—that Tsukiko and Kiriko shared… no, that Tennyo, Kiyone, and Minaho shared as well, yet it was different from what he felt in them. But it was a sense of unease so faint it could have been a mere misunderstanding; it was not a certainty.

"Are you really Aunt Tsukiko?" Seina murmured softly without realizing it.

"!? It's Seina-chan who's making me do this..." After a moment's hesitation, Tsukiko drew her face closer to Seina's.

"Hey, Aunt Tsukiko!"

"Call me Tsukiko," She whispered, her breath warm and sweet.

"Ah, um, Tsukiko-san!?"

Just as Tsukiko's lips were about to touch Seina's, as she held Seina tightly with a strong grip to stop him from escaping,

"Seina-chan, that's not my mother! She's a fake!"

Kiriko and Hakuren burst into the room.

"A fake?"

"Well, well, you're here rather early, aren't you?"

Tsukiko's face and body transformed, changing into the form of another woman.

"Kuisu Panta! The captain of the Senior Staff Unit!?"

Kiriko and the others' expressions instantly shifted to utter shock. The Senior Staff Unit primarily handled practical intelligence operations. Their captain, Kuisu, was a particularly mysterious figure who rarely revealed her true face, not even to Minaho, let alone Seto. Kiriko herself had only ever seen her face in video footage.

"Amazing... Is this real?"

"This is my first time seeing her."

Hakuren and the others reacted as if they'd seen a ghost or a monster. But Kuisu's appearance was hardly befitting the captain of the Senior Staff Unit—a slightly thin woman in her forties, disappointingly plain and ordinary.

"This is the first time we've met in this form. But you girls should be with Seto-sama... Why are you here?"

"Well..."

× × ×

——Beep!

Just as Kiriko was flustered by Seto's countdown, the sudden sound of a communication monitor activating filled the air, and a monitor powered up before Kiriko's eyes.

"Kiriko-sama, a communication from your mother on Earth."

"...Huh!?"

"Ah, Kiriko! I'm so glad you're safe. If you made it to Jurai, you should've at least sent word!"

"M-Mom?"

"Is Seina-chan okay?"

"...Mom, why are you on Earth?"

Kiriko glanced at Seto through the monitor, then quickly looked away.

"What a strange girl. Are you really okay? Minaho-sama told me Seina-chan and the others arrived at Jurai, so I contacted you... Wait, Kiriko!?"

Understanding everything from Seto's expression and Tsukiko's words, Kiriko silently started running after Seina.

"Wait, Kiriko!"

Hakuren followed Kiriko along with the other three.

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"...That's the situation, Senpai."

"I see... Minaho-chan. You're a naughty girl, why are you interrupting my fun? I'll have to punish her later."

"I'm taking Seina-chan back. Kuisu-senpai."

"But before that..."

As Kiriko and the others glared at Kuisu and slowly approached, Kuisu raised her hand smoothly. The moment she did, Kiriko and the other girls froze, as if someone had pressed a pause button. It wasn't like Seto's monstrously intimidating presence. She stopped them with just a casual hand gesture. Reading minds, controlling distance—that was the power of the Senior Staff squad leader, the highest-ranking lady-in-waiting to Seto.

"Hey, Seina-chan. How did you know I wasn't Tsukiko-chan?"

"Huh?"

"You see, my disguises have never been uncovered before. Well, in this line of work, revealing your true identity is a matter of life and death. The fact that I'm alive and here is proof of that..."

Though plain in appearance, up close Kuisu's eyes held a strength and presence shared with Seto—a powerful will. Noticing those eyes, Seina realized that Kuisu, who should have been just an ordinary, plain middle-aged woman, was an incredibly captivating woman, rivaling even Amane or Gyokuren.

"So I'd really like you to teach me, for my own learning."

"Well... somehow..."

Seina, overcome with nervousness, tried to pull away from Kuisu. Noticing Seina's reaction, Kuisu herself stepped back, positioning herself just out of Seina's conscious awareness.

"I know it's difficult, but I'd be grateful if you could explain it in as concrete terms as possible."

"W-well..."

Seina, feeling a little more at ease, recalled what had just happened in his mind and desperately tried to put it into words. Then, glancing briefly at Kiriko, he began to explain in a low whisper, careful not to let Kiriko and the others hear.

"...Oh, I see. So that's how it is... Thank you. That was very valuable feedback." Kuisu smiled as if satisfied, pressed her body close to Seina's once more, then pulled away.

She grabbed Seina's arm, which had gone limp, and effortlessly pulled him to his feet.

"Well then, as a thank you, I'll tell you something useful. When you transform into someone else, you obviously need to know about that person, right?"

"Yes, that's right. I thought you were the real Aunt Tsukiko."

"Heh. So what I said earlier wasn't just a made-up story ♡"

"Huh!? Whoa!!" Seina let out a startled cry.

The moment he let his guard down, Kuisu shoved him into a small pond. Then, Seina vanished in a flash.

"Damn it!"

That spot had become an emergency transfer gate. Kiriko leapt out in an instant, but the gate closed the moment Seina vanished.

"Damn it!"

Glaring at Kuisu, Kiriko started running toward the gate that had brought them to this place.

"Watch out, Kiriko-chan! If you dawdle too long, Tsukiko-chan might beat you to it!"

Kiriko bowed in response to Kuisu's words and leapt into the gate.

"Minaho-chan seems to want to root for Kiriko-chan, but personally, I'd rather root for Tsukiko-chan. Well then, I suppose I must punish Minaho-chan for interfering with my fun." Kuisu murmured with a chilling smile, as she watched Kiriko and the girls depart.

"Hinoki 55, we have confirmed the activation of the emergency gate."

The other senior staff members were shaken by the report.

"I can't believe Kuisu-san's true identity was uncovered!"

"As expected of Seina-dono. His instinct for trouble is genuine. But how long can he resist the cravings of a young body?”

Seto's expression already bore the look of a female executive in a villainous organization plotting something sinister.

"Heh heh, then we'll leave the rest to the young girls."

"Understood! The large bath is ready. ...But Seto-sama. That phrasing makes us sound like old women, doesn't it?"

"Oh dear, just a slip of the tongue. My apologies. The real contest is yet to come. Let them properly stir up Seina-sama's desires!"

"And then we'll get the tasty part..."

"That's it."

Just as Seto and the senior ladies reached this unpleasant consensus, the senior lady handling the operation noticed something amiss.

"Seto-sama, Seina-sama's marker is gone! The transfer point has been altered!"

"What!?"

"A large number of warriors are rushing into the large baths!"

As the massive monitor activated, showing fighters carrying flowers emerging one after another from the gate, a lady in waiting in a swimsuit frantically operated the gate controls.

"What's going on? Quickly seal the gate!"

"S-Seto-sama. It's no use! The gate is locked and I can't operate it!"

Suddenly, a fighter approached the flustered lady.

"Hmm? I feel like I've seen this person at Kanemitsu-dono's place before..."

"Ahh! That's my son. Actually, that lady-in-waiting is our neighbor Junyu-chan!" One of the senior maids exclaimed.

Then, in the next instant, "Junyu-san, please marry me!" The senior lady-in-waiting's son presented a bouquet to the lady-in-waiting.

"!!!?"

At those words, Seto and everyone else present froze in shock. Looking around, they saw fighters proposing and confessing their feelings all over the large bathhouse.

"S-S-S-Seto-sama... um, um..."

Junyu gazed at Seto with pleading eyes. But this wasn't a look of dislike for his proposal or a cry for help. It stemmed from a dilemma: she wanted to accept that confession, but couldn't, because personal matters were fundamentally forbidden during missions.

“Junyu-chan was so considerate of him when I was too busy to pay him much attention… But looking back now, the reason they grew a little distant as she got older was because he started seeing her as a woman.” A senior staff member began speaking as if she were giving an emotionally charged reading.

“...Come to think of it, ever since Junyu-chan entered the Kamiki Girls’ School, a private boarding school run by the Kamiki family, my kid’s been kind of down. When she was chosen to be Seto-sama’s lady-in-waiting, he actually went through a bit of a rough patch. Then he suddenly started studying really hard, so I wondered what was going on, but when I heard he’d applied to be a reserve officer in the Sentinel Fleet, I thought, ‘Ah, so he’s finally found his motivation.’ But… I see, so that’s what it was all about. By the way, I asked her to take care of my son’s first time.”

The senior lady looked at the other senior lady nearby.

"Personally, if I were that girl, I’d have remarried already, but it seems that was rejected."

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

"It's fine. Things like this just happen. But I hope it works out for her."

"Thank you. I'd feel relieved if it worked out too..."

As they said this, the senior ladies were all staring intently at Seto at the same time.

“What’s with you?! You don’t have to put on such a phony act—I’m not a monster, you know!”

With that, Seto turned toward the monitor and declared, "Operation One is now complete.

Those wishing to proceed with Operation Two, assemble at your designated positions. After that, you're free to go."

Then she cut the transmission. As she turned off the monitor, she caught a glimpse of Junyu clinging to the senior staff member's son out of the corner of her eye. Feeling drained for a moment, Seto activated another monitor and began yelling at it.

"Dammit... Kanemitsu! Is Kanemitsu there!?"

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

"That was your doing, wasn't it!? What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

“Isn’t it a bit much to send that many people after him? I’ve actually met Seina-dono myself. Well, you could call it my own little screening process.” With that, Kanemitsu promptly cut the communication.

"Damn it! ...What's the situation at the main bathhouse?"

"Over half the fighters are concentrated on the accounting department. The accounting unit is popular, as expected. Even so, it seems there aren't any girls who haven't been confessed to at all."

"At this point, about thirty-one percent have formed couples or are likely to. Sixteen percent are causing some kind of trouble, twenty-nine percent have withdrawn from the front lines, and the rest..."

"The continued hospitality group, huh. ...Well, sure, that many left is plenty."

"What about the dropouts?"

"Let's just hope things work out for them."

Dropouts referred to the female officials who, inspired by the commotion, went to confess to their own crushes.

"But where on earth has Seina-dono gone?"

"Still unknown. Even with the transfer gate, how they're interfering with our control remains unexplained..."

"Someone is definitely helping Minaho-chan."

"But to outsmart Seto-sama's system... that's not something just anyone could do..."

"...Huh! Could it be!?"

Realizing something, Seto quickly opened the line to Earth.

“Waaaah!!”

Suddenly, feeling as if he'd been tossed out of nowhere and plummeting headfirst, Seina instinctively tried to shield his head and twist his body. Just then, he suddenly came to a halt in midair, still upside down.

"Ugh!"

Seina felt blood rush to his head, accompanied by an unpleasant sensation of something wrapped around his ankles. He immediately scanned his surroundings to assess the situation, but all he could see was a massive tree trunk, foliage, and a spring just a few inches above his head—the very spot he had been falling toward.

"Where... am I?"

The very next moment, Seina's vision spun dizzyingly, and before his eyes appeared the smiling face of a woman.

"Welcome, Seina-chan."

"Huh!? Whaaaat!!”

Seina recognized the woman's face, but before he could remember her name, his vision began to spin violently again, and he felt as if he was being picked up in a car that had suddenly accelerated. The next thing that caught Seina's eye was the woman's profile and the scenery passing by at an incredible speed.

(Am I being carried upstairs by this woman?)

That was his conclusion, but the situation lasted only as long as it took him to think it.

"Seina-chan's here!"

Suddenly, Seina was flung forward with the momentum of someone running. From there, he couldn't explain what position he was in. For an instant, he felt the unpleasant sensation of spinning violently, then his body came to a gentle halt and he found himself sitting on what felt like a soft cushion.

"Couldn't you just bring him normally?" A quiet yet commanding voice. Then, "Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?"

A concerned woman crouched down before him.

"...Masaki Funaho Jurai... sama?"

At Seina's words, Funaho flashed a bright smile. Once he recognized one person, the rest came quickly. The one who brought him here was Masaki Misaki Jurai. And though his face was still hidden, the man whose presence lingered diagonally behind Seina was (No matter how you look at it, it's Emperor Jurai, Masaki Azusa Jurai-sama, right...?)

Seina quickly distanced himself from the three and stood at attention, saluting.

Kiriko boarded a sightseeing train with Hakuren and the other girls. This train traversed the lower, middle, and upper regions of Tenju, stopping at locations open to tourists. It was a leisurely journey covering about a thousand kilometers, taking five days to a week, with stops along the way to see various sights and landmarks. Each car had five passenger compartments, while the front and rear cars were Royal Rooms, each containing only one compartment.

"Welcome aboard."

"Ringo-sama!? Why are you here?"

Guided by the crew to the rear car, Kiriko and the others were greeted at the entrance by Ringo, dressed in the train crew's uniform.

"My family operates this line. Now, Minaho-sama awaits you."

Guided by Ringo, Kiriko and the others entered and were greeted in the lounge, which offered a panoramic view of the sky, by Minaho, who wore a cheerful expression.

"Good work. It must have been quite a journey. Please, sit down. Hakuren, you and your team also, don't be shy."

"Minaho-sama, where is Seina-chan now?" Kiriko couldn't stay put and rushed over to Minaho.

"Right now, he's in the Heavenly Chamber with Grandfather and the others."

"The... Emperor Jurai and the others!? But—"

"How he got there is a secret. In that place, even Seto-sama can't just casually interfere."

"I see..." Kiriko sat down on the sofa, looking relieved.

Just then, Ringo placed tea on the table in front of her and smiled.

"Please take a moment to relax. Hakuren’s team too."

At Ringo's words, Hakuren and the others also sat down on the sofa.

"But Minaho-sama, how do you intend to resolve this situation? Honestly, we're outnumbered... How far can we protect Seina-chan against Seto-sama...? Besides, what Seto-sama is trying to do is something we'll have to face eventually."

"It's no wonder Kiriko-chan feels discouraged, but in this case, Seto-sama doesn't have any deep thoughts either. It's more like letting off steam, you see."

"Letting off steam!?"

"You know why the pirate suppression plan—the one that brought Seina-kun and Seto-sama together—was devised, right?"

"Yes. With the increase in member nations of the Galactic Federation, the burden of dispatching forces to the GP military and the war expenses due to territorial expansion became too much..."

"Yes... Kiriko-chan knows too, right? How much fiscal tightening that required..."

"It was hell... Ringo-sama was like a demon..."

Kiriko and the others paled at the memory, their bodies trembling slightly. Ringo cleared her throat softly and quickly looked away.

"That's when Seina-kun entered the picture. The sharp decline in pirate attacks after his arrival brought significant economic benefits not just to the Galactic Federation, but to Jurai too. Naturally, tax revenues rose while anti-piracy costs fell. Plus, with the massive bounties for pirate suppression and corporate donations, you can guess what happened to Jurai's economy just by seeing how excited Ringo-chan gets, right?"

"...Yes. Well, it was quite something."

"Naturally, it wasn't just the Accounting Department that rejoiced. The relief felt by all the other departments, which had been forced to endure budget cuts by Accounting, was immense. Everything started moving in a positive direction. It was during this time that Ryo-Ohki-chan arrived on Jurai on an errand for Washu-sama. Kiriko-chan and the others were helped too, so you know about that, right?"

"Y-yes."

The moment she said that, Kiriko and the others' expressions softened into an indescribably gentle, warm glow.

"She was so much cuter than the image I'd heard about through rumors, wasn't she?"

"Yes. I even thought I'd like to have a child like that someday."

"The court ladies' daughters were in quite a stir too. Partly because they were fascinated by someone who fought Jurai on equal terms."

"Could this whole commotion be...?"

"Exactly. Having financial freedom gave them the opportunity to think about their own lifestyle. What's more, our gratitude towards Seina-kun, which had been left unsatisfied after Ringo-chan's counterattack, has now been elevated to something close to adoration after this incident. And now that Seina-kun himself is visiting Jurai... you can probably guess the rest, right?"

"So it's just venting... Seriously, Seto-sama!!"

A spark of determination returned to the eyes of Kiriko and the others, who had seemed somewhat passive. Seeing this, Minaho nodded as if relieved.

"This commotion has a time limit. Seina-kun's schedule after the luncheon has almost no breathing room, and he'll be assigned a new mission by evening. If you're going to make a move, it has to be before the luncheon."

"A new mission?"

"Yes, I expect word will come soon."

"Understood. Then, until the luncheon, if His Majesty Emperor Jurai can keep Seina-chan with him..."

"For now, I think he's safe." Minaho's words eased the tension in the room.

Then a voice cut through the relaxed atmosphere, instantly tightening the air.

"Right. Well then, we must hurry." Hakuren declared.

"Hakuren!?"

Before the bewildered eyes of Minaho and the others, Hakuren's form shifted into Kuisu Panta, and the rear car of the sightseeing train they were riding was detached.

"Kuisu-senpai! When did you...?"

"Trying to blend in by moving separately is counterproductive here. Remember that, Kiriko-chan."

Winking at Kiriko, Kuisu turned to Minaho with a cheerful expression.

"Now then, Minaho-sama. Since you interrupted my enjoyment, I'd like to offer my thanks?"

"Oh, no need for thanks. Please don't worry about such things..."

Even Minaho was overwhelmed by Kuisu's imposing presence.

"There's no need to be so reserved. It's simply a matter of putting His Majesty Jurai, no, your grandfather and grandmother, at ease. Ah, and might we also have Ringo-sama join us?"

Under Kuisu's piercing gaze, not a single person present could move.

"Seto-sama, Seina-sama's location has been identified. As expected, he’s on the top floor of the Imperial Palace, the 'Heavenly Chamber'. Minaho-sama, Ringo-sama, and everyone else have been secured."

"So Tenju was controlling the gate after all. Minaho-chan... I never imagined you'd ask Sasami-chan on Earth for help."

"Which means we've been officially labeled villains by both the Masaki families on Earth and Jurai, huh?"

"Well, she was always the villain anyway. Worrying about it is pointless."

"I don't really care, but hearing it said to my face kinda hurts." Seto puffed out her cheeks and sulked.

"Unfortunately, the plan's off. We can't exactly go after His Majesty the Emperor of Jurai..."

"It's too early to give up. Go get Yuzaki right now!"

"Yuzaki-sama!? ...I see. Since Seina-sama is visiting Jurai for the first time..." The senior maids, instantly grasping Seto's intent, responded with bright, cheerful voices.

"Exactly. Even Azusa-chan couldn't protect Seina-dono from that. Heh heh, heh heh heh heh heh, Ooooh ho ho ho ho!"

"Wow~, what splendid villainy!"

"As expected of Seto-sama!"

The senior maids surrounded Seto like theatergoers, clapping from a distance.

"Kuh! You lot are that villain's minions too, you know! Stop fooling around and call Yuzaki already!"

"Got it~~♡"

Seto and the senior staff's giddy, high-school-girl-like excitement was something completely unimaginable from their usual demeanor.

Chapter Nine: Duel!

The room looked like a big birdcage.

A circular floor about twenty meters in diameter was densely covered with plants resembling fine feathers. At its center sat a circular, sofa-like depression and a wooden table. Thick vine-like branches formed a dome-shaped net, with various plants—flowers, glowing fruits, and more—parasitizing it, creating a beautiful landscape. Most astonishingly, all that could be seen through the gaps was sky—meaning this room was located at the very top of Tenju.

"I am Yamada Seina, Captain of the Academy-affiliated experimental ship Kamidake."

Unaware of the location's uniqueness, Seina saluted tensely.

"Yes. I am Emperor Jurai, Masaki Azusa Jurai. And..."

"I am Masaki Funaho Jurai, head of the Masaki family and First Empress of the Jurai Imperial House."

"And I am Masaki Misaki Jurai, the Second Empress of the Jurai Imperial Family."

"Now that the introductions are out of the way..."

"Yay, Seina-chan, come sit here."

Before Azusa could finish speaking, Misaki pulled Seina over to her side and tried to force him to sit down.

"Misaki-chan"

"Oh, sorry."

Scolded by Funaho, Misaki quickly took Seina back to where he had been sitting.

"First, allow me to express my gratitude for the package you protected. As you can see..."

Azusa and the Empresses bowed deeply to Seina.

"Ah, um! I was just doing my duty..."

"To have protected it from all those pirates... That package was incredibly important to us."

"I see... I'm glad it arrived safely. But... Ah, no, it's nothing."

"Hmm. You seem curious about the contents of that cargo. That old hag will explain it to you, so bear with it for a little while longer." Azusa, sensing Seina's curiosity, said in a friendly tone.

"N-no, prying into someone's personal belongings... That old hag?"

"Ah, I mean The Demon Princess of Jurai, Kamiki Seto Jurai. Oh, yeah."

Azusa pulled a small card from his pocket and handed it to Seina.

"For now, if you want to file a complaint about trouble caused by that old hag, this is the place to go. This card also doubles as a membership card, so you can register later."

"I, I understand. Thank you very much. But... at the moment, I don't really feel like she's caused any trouble or anything, or I can't think of anything... and besides, Seto-sama is the one who made it possible for me to go up into space."

Hearing Seina's words, Azusa, who had gone through a similar experience, gave a strained smile.

"Well, at this stage, it may not really sink in yet... But let's see, if you compare it to the

troubles Airi causes, you might get the idea."

"...I see. I understand perfectly."

"Hahahaha! As an actress, that damn old hag is way better than you."

Seeing Seina's immediate response, Azusa laughed out loud.

"Um... does this include any options related to Airi-sama or...?"

"Hmm, well... I'll think about it next time. Anyway, that wraps up the business matters."

As soon as Azusa said that, Misaki pounced on Seina as if she'd been waiting for it, seating him beside herself just as before. She pulled tea and sweets from bushes here and there, arranging them on the table until they were practically spilling over.

"Now, don't be shy, eat up!"

Misaki happily seated Seina beside her and began stroking his closely cropped hair.

(Ah, Misaki-sama's vibe... I thought she reminded me of someone. It's Mitoto-san.)

"There's no need to be so nervous. Just relax and think of this as your own home."

"Seina-dono isn't just our benefactor... well, I suppose you could say we're practically family."

"F-family...?"

Being told you were practically family with the head of the universe's most powerful military nation would confuse anyone, not just Seina.

"Kiriko-san and the others are Imperial Family members of the Masaki family, Tenchi and Tennyo are my great-grandchildren, Aeka-san and Sasami-chan are Misaki-chan's daughters, and... Kiyone is my grandchild."

"Kiyone... Auntie..."

"Tennyo has told me all about it."

Hearing Kiyone's name, Seina's expression saddened slightly. Funaho gently stroked his head, and Misaki hugged him tightly.

"On a galactic scale, if you're from the same planet, and especially from such a close location, it's practically like living in the same room of the same house."

"Ah, thank you."

Seina was so happy that he shed a few tears. It wasn't because of what Azusa and the others had told him, but ever since they first met, he had felt a nostalgic familiarity in the atmosphere they had.

"Mmmmm! So cute!"

Misaki spun Seina around, hugging him tightly, and began rubbing his cheek against hers. Seina was so moved that he wanted to ask for help, but gave up when he saw the confused looks on Azusa and Funaho's faces.

"Come on, Misaki-chan. Calm down a bit." Funaho said after waiting for Misaki's excitement to subside a bit.

"O-okay~"

At that, Misaki swiftly sat Seina between Funaho and herself.

"Now, have some tea." Funaho offered Seina some cold tea, trying to help him settle down.

"Thank you..."

After gulping down the cold tea and taking a deep breath, Seina finally recovered from the shock of Misaki's passionate embrace and found himself able to look around. Only then did he realize the significance of this place and the fact that no one else was here besides Azusa and the others.

"...Um, was it okay for me to come in here?"

A place where the head of a nation would be without servants was likely a private space.

"What are you talking about now? Don't worry about it. Someone higher than me invited Seina-dono here."

"Huh!? Someone higher than the Emperor of Jurai?"

"This is Tenju. Jurai was originally a place ruled by the Royal Trees. We're only living here with their permission."

"Come to think of it, I heard something about you settling here..."

"It's not about formal permission or anything stiff like that. We just became friends."

"Ahh, I see. That makes sense. Ringo-sama and Honoka-chan's relationship was kind of like that too."

"The reason Tenju sent Seina-dono here was to stop that damn old hag's scheme."

"Seto-sama's scheme?"

"By the way, Seina-dono. Do you have any interest in taking Minaho as your bride?"

"Huh?"

"You're being too abrupt."

Seina's expression must have been utterly dumbfounded, for Funaho was struggling hard to stifle her laughter.

"So, she was planning to pull that off on a scale that includes the ladies-in-waiting. If Tenju hadn't been controlling the gate, we would have been thrown right into that trap."

"Oh, by the way, there was this person named Kuisu who was disguised as Aunt Tsukiko..."

"Kuisu Panta?! Really?"

"Yes... Kiriko-san said that after seeing her in her normal form."

"...I see. So she's that serious, huh?"

A fleeting look of sorrow flashed across Azusa's face, but it instantly shifted to one of utter exasperation.

"Still, that damn old hag... deploying the senior staff unit too... Huh!?"

At that moment, an audio monitor near Azusa's ear activated.

"It's me... What!?... Oh, I see. So that's how it is. Understood. Can't be helped."

Azusa spoke for a moment, then looked at Seina with a pained expression.

"Seina-dono, Minaho and Ringo-dono have been taken hostage."

"What!? Minaho-sama and Ringo-sama are being held hostage?"

"Oh dear! What shall we do?"

"Hmm. The enemy demands a duel with Seina-dono."

"A duel!? Why me?"

"Seina-dono's martial prowess is renowned even in Jurai."

"Martial prowess... I only know a little self-defense from GP Academy..."

"Considering that you repelled hundreds of pirates and Tarrant's assault, that's not entirely accurate. But rest assured. I won't let our important guest be put in danger."

"But dear! What about Minaho-chan and Ringo-dono?!"

"Those girls are daughters of Jurai. If they become hostages, and worse, if they realize they're the reason Seina-dono was put in danger, even if they survive, they wouldn't live on in shame."

"But..."

"Misaki! Deploy fighters to the duel site! Ignore the hostages and capture the perpetrator..."

"Wait! I'll go!" Seina stood up, cutting off Azusa's words.

"But, but!"

"I'm sure they were caught up in my bad luck. So I have to do something about it."

"From my perspective, I can't expose Jurai's benefactor to danger either."

"To me, Minaho-sama is also my benefactor. She treated me kindly, knowing full well about my bad luck. And I became friends with Honoka-chan, Ringo-sama's ship."

Faced with Seina's earnest gaze, Azusa let out a deep sigh.

"Alright. Will you do it?"

"Yes!"

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"Okay then, Tatsua, I'm counting on you."

"Yes."

Masaki Tatsua bowed to Azusa and got into the driver's seat of the air car that Seina was in. The air car rose silently and quickly receded into the distance, becoming smaller and smaller.

"I never imagined you'd resort to that tactic, Seto-sama."

"After all, it's Seina-chan's first visit to Jurai."

Funaho and Misaki exchanged glances and smiled.

"He really is a good boy, isn't he?"

"Ah. Though he does have a slightly naive side. Normally, those with skewed probabilities tend to flee danger... or rather, they should."

"If it's as the report stated, then encounters with danger probably don't matter much, no matter how careful one is, right?"

"That's precisely why his high ability, honed by surviving that hellish ordeal, is so heartbreaking... Just how much has he endured until now?"

People exposed to war weren't rare. And in those cases, everyone around them faced the same conditions; they weren't constantly targeted. Like animals living in packs, they could divide the role of detecting danger. But what about when the surroundings were peaceful, yet you were always the target? Seina has lived in that situation since the moment he was born.

"Heh, The Masaki's just can't leave someone like that alone, can they?"

"No wonder that damn old hag incited her subordinates. ...Seriously, could you take Minaho off my hands?"

"I suppose we'll just have to let things take their course."

"Oh, big sis. If things don't seem to be progressing, why not just push her on him?"

"That might work. We've waited seven hundred years. Another hundred shouldn't hurt, right?"

"If things don't progress much, I'll send her off with a gift tag instead of a year-end present."

Azusa nodded, watching the direction the aircar had vanished.

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"Are you nervous?" Tatsua asked Seina, a few minutes after the aircar started moving.

"Huh!?... Yes, a little. But more than that, I'm worried about Minaho-san and the Ringo-san..."

“If their goal was a duel with Seina-dono, then they achieved that the moment you accepted the challenge, so I think Minaho-sama and the Ringo-sama are fine.”

"But... what if something unexpected happens?"

"For us, Seina-dono's safety is our primary concern. What the opponent desires is the honor of defeating you. Even if your reputation were to suffer, the merit of exposing that would outweigh any minor punishment. Conversely, it means there's no need to harm Minaho-chan or Ringo-dono."

"Well, that's fine then."

"But Seina-dono could get away with a scratch at best, or even die at worst."

"Well, that's just the way it always is."

"Still, I'd prefer that you return safely. After all, my wife wishes to speak with you."

"Your wife?"

"My wife once cared for Misaki-sama's daughter, Sasami-sama. However, Sasami-sama's presence on Earth is classified, so she was only permitted to communicate once. That's why she wishes to hear anything at all about Sasami-sama from Seina-dono."

"I see... I understand. I'll do my best."

“Please. ...By the way, is Yosho-dono doing well?

"Yosho? Oh, you mean Tenchi-senpai's grandfather?"

"Yes, that's him. Actually, we're old acquaintances. I'm the reason he left Jurai."

"Oh really? He's doing incredibly well. He looked after me in many ways, and back in the day, he scolded me quite a bit, hahaha... But when I went up into space and learned his true identity, the thing that surprised me most was that he'd married Airi-san."

"Hahaha, I'm glad to hear he's doing well." Tatsua answered with a laugh.

But the people of Jurai knew that Yosho and Airi had a special relationship from the Imperial Academy, and above all, they recognized Minaho as Yosho's child.

"When Yosho ran away, I worried terribly. Only recently did I learn he was safe, and you can imagine how relieved I was... But then I heard he'd been in contact with Seto-sama all this time, and even knew about Minaho. It's embarrassing to admit, but if I spoke to Yosho now, I'd probably complain before I could apologize."

"And now to me..."

"My apologies. I've made you listen to such a disgraceful story. Well, the dueling grounds are coming into view."

It was one of the ruins left by Ryoko, located a little way off in the lower regions of Tenju. Though called ruins, decaying giant trees lay piled atop one another, and already, trees over a hundred meters tall had grown from them as if using the debris as a seedbed.

"There's a space within that tangled mass of trees that serves as a training ground and playground for the fighters."

The aircar landed atop one of the fallen giants. Tatsua stepped out and opened the rear door where Seina sat.

"If you go straight across these fallen trees, you'll reach the spot they specified."

In the direction Tatsua pointed lay a massive cavern formed by the overlapping giant trees.

"Understood. Thank you."

Seina bowed to Tatsua, then began walking straight toward the destination. His stride was steady, showing not a shred of fear.

"He said he had no martial arts training, but that walk is quite something. ...Hmm, I see. The result of living constantly on the edge of danger... But if that's the case..."

Tatsua considered following him for a moment, but then muttered, “Well, there are spectators around, so it should be fine... But please, stay calm, Yuzaki-dono.”

With that, he turned on his heel and climbed into the aircar.

Seina walked straight through the huge cavern, following the fallen logs. The inside of the cavern was quite bright, with sunlight streaming in through gaps in the ceiling. There was a lot of moss, vines, and parasitic plants growing there, and the rotting fallen logs were all tangled together, making it look like a natural athletics park. He could hear the sound of flowing water, but it seemed to be quite far down, so she couldn't confirm its presence.

After walking for about ten minutes, he suddenly emerged into a spacious, dome-like space.

"Whoa... What is this?"

Instantly, Seina recognized this as the designated spot and braced himself.

"Interesting place, isn't it? This is inside a large stump, you see. The relatively soft inner part rotted away, leaving only the hard outer bark behind, forming this shape, kiddo."

The speaker, who had appeared out of nowhere, stepped from the shadows into the spotlight-like sunlight streaming through the ceiling. The woman had a short, side-parted haircut that made her look almost masculine for a moment, and a sharp, angular face. Even just walking a little, her slender, model-like body gave the impression of being as flexible as a leopard, yet holding immense power, her entire body like a spring.

(...But)

The atmosphere emanating from her, while possessing a certain roughness, also conveyed purity and nobility. In other words, she wasn't the type to take someone hostage.

"What about Minaho-sama and Ringo-sama?"

"They're safe, of course. We're treating them with the utmost respect."

Where the woman pointed, near the dome ceiling, Minaho and Ringo were bound and gagged, clearly hostages, restrained by the men. Only then did Seina notice the large group of men perched on the wall protrusions, looking down at them.

"Oh? Finally noticed them? Well, they're just spectators. Think of them as giant mushrooms growing on the wall."

The woman laughed as she said this—but Seina had something else on her mind.

"May I ask a question?"

"What is it?"

"Why are Minaho-sama and Ringo-sama wearing maid outfits?"

That's right! The two bound figures were wearing the same maid outfits Hakuren and the others had worn at Amane's house.

"There's this saying on Earth, 'maidens souvenir,' right? So I figured if the kid wins, I'd have him bring one back as a souvenir."

"Um... the meaning of that phrase is a bit different, you know."

".....Oh?"

The woman looked at Seina with a puzzled expression. But she quickly regained her composure and said, "Well, cross-cultural misunderstandings happen all the time, so I'm not embarrassed at all." Her face flushed slightly as she puffed herself up.

"Sis. We are embarrassed!"

"I told you so many times that it has a different meaning!"

"You really don't listen to a word people say."

The men restraining Minaho and the others all spoke up in confusion.

"Shut up! You mushrooms, just be quiet! Talking mushrooms are just creepy!"

"Heyyyyy!" The men muttered discontentedly before shutting up.

"Anyway, please release Minaho-sama and Ringo-sama. I won't run or hide." Amidst the somewhat heartwarming atmosphere, Seina, still flushed, spoke to the woman who looked bewildered.

"They’re insurance to prevent any interruptions along the way. I'll release them after our duel, kid. Besides, whether you win or lose, if they’re not there, it'd be rather dull, wouldn't it? In all sorts of ways."

Cheers, whistles, and stomping echoed around them at the woman's words.

"I'm so kind, aren't I? ...Well then, shall we begin?"

At the woman's signal, a man carrying a case filled with various weapons approached Seina. Seina glanced at the weapons and selected one resembling a tonfa.

"Quite a good choice. Wielding long weapons is tricky in this place. That one can be used as a shield or a gun, depending on how you handle it. Well, that person won't die from such a little thing, so fight without holding back." The man said as he grinned.

"Well, good luck."

Watching the man walk away with the case, Seina swung the weapon around to test its feel. "Yeah. Feels about right."

As he swung the weapon, a thud! sound echoed as an energy pellet fired, grazing the spectator's cheek and leaving a small scorch mark on the wall.

"Hey, you! That's dangerous!"

The man's shout drew laughter from those around him.

"S-sorry! Are you okay!?"

"Ahahahaha! Fine, fine! Since it's before the duel, I'll let that careless mushroom get hit once. Alright, kid, the sound of this rock hitting the ground is your signal!"

The woman tossed a large stone, about ten centimeters in diameter, lightly up toward the ceiling. Then, her demeanor suddenly changed.

"Huh?!"

She became almost completely devoid of any presence. No fighting spirit, no killing intent—if you couldn't see her, you'd doubt she was even there at all.

THUD!! Simultaneously with the sound of the falling stone, the woman's sword extended like a whip and suddenly attacked Seina. However, Seina's body flew backward faster than the tip of the whip could pierce the ground.

"Ha! Nice dodge on that first strike! I'm a bit shocked."

The woman's expression turned displeased as she suddenly closed the distance, flying forward. Seina had no time to think, darting like a hare between the cover.

(If I stop moving, I'm done for.)

Seina stopped worrying about his back and began running desperately, eyes fixed only forward.

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"Huh... dodging Yuzaki's first move, huh?" Azusa grunted in mild surprise.

Right now, Azusa was in a large waiting room with Kiriko, who had been captured by Seto, Kanemitsu, Airi, and several others. Incidentally, Misaki was left behind in the "Heavenly Chamber" under Funaho's watchful eye to prevent her from getting overexcited about the duel and barging in.

"What do you think, Kanemitsu-dono?" Seto asked Kanemitsu, who stood behind her, without taking her eyes off the monitor.

“Yuzaki's first strike was less an attack and more like an unintended accident. Even a master

would struggle to read it. It took me years to dodge it, and I'm used to it.”

"That's right."

"An unseen technique combined with the weapon's unique properties. For Seina-dono, a complete novice in martial arts, to suddenly dodge that was nothing short of a miracle."

"Hmm. Since it wasn't something easily dodged by chance, it's better to assume he dodged it intentionally."

"Seina-chan has always been exposed to sudden dangers..."

"So his initial reaction is fast. If that's the case, his instincts are master-level... Hmm!" Azusa stared intently at Seina's movements on the monitor.

“Kanemitsu, is this the first time Yuzaki has used that place?”

“Yes. I made sure to keep outsiders out.”

"I see. Well, this is quite something."

"What do you mean, Azusa-dono?"

Seto's role was intelligence gathering and rear support. Even Seto couldn't match Azusa and the other fighters in close combat.

"Seina-dono evading Yuzaki's pursuit stems not only from his instinct for danger, but also from the difference in how they handle the footing. Of course, Yuzaki holding back is part of it too."

"I see. Seina-dono moves the shortest distance without stepping on dangerous footing, while Yuzaki occasionally has to react after landing. That's the difference, right?"

"Exactly. But tripping over nothing or animals suddenly leaping out... it's frustrating. Without that, Seina-dono would have a bit more leeway."

"This has happened before. He avoids every trap I set, yet stumbles or slips in the most unexpected places..."

"So that's what you mean by probability bias."

At Azusa's words, everyone sighed with puzzled expressions.

“In other words, he’s managed to escape from Yuzaki-dono despite that handicap. No wonder he survived Tarrant’s attack.”

"Yuzaki has her own handicaps too. If she truly intended to defeat him, it would be over by now. Still, if Seina-dono manages to learn some counterattack method while evading like that, it would be incredible."

"While fleeing?"

"Given Seina-dono's tendency to face multiple opponents, that's a perfectly valid tactic. He isn't a fighter like us. Even in a one-on-one battle, there's no need to insist on a head-on confrontation."

"So he's basically a decoy unit, then."

"However, with such a strong performance, it's difficult to find a solution. Yuzaki's attacks are also getting serious."

"The subordinates watching this should be well aware of that." Seto said to Kanemitsu, who was staring anxiously at the monitor, trying to calm him.

While Kanemitsu, as both husband and subordinate, knew Yuzaki's personality and fighting style best, the men in the arena were also seasoned veterans who had fought alongside her for years. If Yuzaki became endangered, they would surely intervene.

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"Hey, this is getting a little dangerous."

As Seto had expected, Yuzaki's subordinates had also noticed her behavior.

"I never thought it would drag on this long..."

"Yeah, the plan was to knock Seina-dono unconscious with the first strike, then have Minaho-sama and Ringo-sama tend to him."

"It's a pleasant surprise that someone from the same hometown as the First Empress, Funaho-sama, could put up such a good fight against Yuzaki-sama... But anyway, if Yuzaki-sama gets into any kind of danger, I'll stop it."

"If that's the case, I should have equipped a Guardian."

While Yuzaki's subordinates were discussing this, Seina himself had noticed another danger.

"Everyone, run!"

"Ah, you idiot!!"

Yuzaki's whip struck Seina, who had stopped to shout. It happened so suddenly that even Yuzaki couldn't control it at that point.

Crack! Seina cranked his shield's power to maximum and caught the whip—which had effortlessly shattered a section of the giant tree as it lashed out—with both hands. A series of factors came together, and somehow the whip came to a halt, coiled around Seina's arms.

“Damn it!”

Seina grimaced in pain as his arms screeched. Had even one of those conditions been different, his arms would have been torn clean off.

"Everyone, it's dangerous! Get away from here!"

"Hey, kid! Stopping in the middle of a fight? Are you out of your mind!?"

"This is not a good place! Please evacuate quickly!"

"Huh? What are you—?!"

Just as the suspicious woman—no, Yuzaki—began to speak, the commotion of birds and small animals erupted from all around. They burst out of their hiding places simultaneously and began fleeing.

"Everyone evacuate! Hurry!"

Realizing the danger, Yuzaki's subordinates acted swiftly at her command. But just as they evacuated Minaho and Ringo first, a rumbling shook the entire dueling arena.

"Whoa!"

The ground suddenly collapsed beneath his feet, and Seina began to fall. He was only saved by the whip coiled around his arms.

"Hold on tight, kid!"

"It's too late! Escape quickly!"

"Yuzaki-sama!"

Just as the subordinates tried to rush to Yuzaki, who was attempting to pull Seina up, the entire fragile ceiling began to collapse, engulfing Yuzaki as well.

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"Rescue team, hurry! Advanced life support team too!" Azusa shouted as he dashed out alongside Kiriko.

Seto and Airi, each seemingly fully aware of their assigned roles, immediately began their tasks: notifying relevant parties and issuing commands.

Thanks to swift action and highly skilled staff, Seina and the Yuzaki were rescued just thirty minutes later. The search by tens of thousands of microprobes confirmed that only Seina and Yuzaki had been caught in the collapse. Both were found safe, trapped in a gap in the rubble. The immediate strategy was to deploy a Guardian System into that gap, shield the two with the Guardian, forcibly crush the rubble, and extract them.

Although the microprobes and Guardian System had already checked their injuries beforehand, Seina and Yuzaki were immediately transported into sterile capsules on the

spot for a detailed scan.

"Airi-sama, is Seina-chan okay!?"

Kiriko and the others gathered around Airi as she performed the detailed scan. Among them were Amane and Elma, who had rushed over upon hearing the news, as well as Minaho and Ringo, who had safely escaped the collapse.

"He was in a gap created by the collapsed debris, so he doesn't have any major external injuries. The detailed scan is just to be safe."

"I see... That's a relief."

"Airi-dono, what about Yuzaki?"

Once Kiriko and the others had calmed down, Kanemitsu approached Airi. They nervously made way for him.

"Hmm... Right. Yuzaki-san is fine. Just some scrapes and minor bruises, nothing serious, really." Airi said as she released Yuzaki, who had finished the detailed scan, from the capsule.

"Haha, sorry about that." Yuzaki apologized to Kanemitsu, who looked exasperated, striking a slightly cute pose.

"You're apologizing to the wrong person, aren't you?"

"I apologized plenty to Seina-dono while we were trapped. Of course, I'll properly apologize again later..."

Facing Seina, she seemed genuinely remorseful, and Yuzaki bowed her head with a serious expression.

"It seems you've come to terms with what you've done. Anyway, I'm glad you're safe."

"It's thanks to him. Anyway, if Seina-dono hadn't warned us so quickly when we were caught in the collapse, several others might have been caught up too. If I'd fallen down there alone, I could have escaped, of course. But..."

"Stop it."

"Ugh, yeah... So I matched my evasive action to his… No, Seina-dono."

"Seina-dono's evasive maneuvers!?"

"That was incredible... Honestly, I was shocked. It was clearly an evasive maneuver calculated with me in mind—well, probably without him consciously thinking about it, but it was calculated with me in mind. And he didn't use brute force to push anyone aside at all. I couldn't pull that off. In the end, before I knew it, I found myself in a gap the size of two people, almost unharmed."

"Earth doesn't have Bio-Enhancement techniques or Guardians. Besides, it's impossible for a young child to rely on brute force."

"If only the odds weren't stacked against him, that child could become an incredible fighter."

"But that bias is what nurtured his talent."

"I see... You're right."

Just as Yuzaki was coming to terms with Seina's circumstances, Kiriko and the others began murmuring—likely because Seina's detailed scan results had arrived.

"Airi-sama, how is Seina-dono?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly say he's in perfect condition, but there are no life-threatening injuries."

Airi's words eased the tension in the room.

"He has about eighty scrapes, cuts, and bruises all over his body. The worst is the contusion on the arm that took Yuzaki-dono's whip, but the next worst are bite marks and claw scratches. What on earth is that?"

"Ah, well, Chibisuke, who used to live here, wandered into the space where Seina-dono and I were trapped... I suppose he was a bit excited by the collapse, but he seemed surprised to see us."

Chibisuke referred to small squirrel-like creatures. Juraian fighters were, in a sense, the strongest beings, and even large carnivores didn't approach them. That's why those creatures gathered near the fighters, seeking safety.

"It looks like he's gotten more injuries over something trivial."

"As expected of Seina-kun"

Amane and Elma seemed relieved and spoke in their usual tone.

"Airi, so it's not an injury requiring urgent attention, then?"

"Yes, Father-in-law. I think it's best to let him rest at the hospital just in case."

"I see. Then, may I speak with him for a moment?"

At Azusa's words, Seto and Kanemitsu, their faces tense, gathered around him.

"Seina-dono, we have caused a tremendous mess this time. I apologize on behalf of Jurai."

Emperor Jurai bowed deeply to Seina, while Seto, Kanemitsu, and Yuzaki, behind him, knelt down in apology. At the very least, they had never seen Emperor Jurai and Seto bow to someone together. Kiriko and the other warriors, as well as the rescue team members,

stared at the scene in amazement.

"No, not at all. I'm the one who dragged you all into this..."

"It is unforgivable that this 'trial ceremony' caused injury outside of battle to a man who showed such admirable resolve, and who is moreover a benefactor to Jurai."

"The main reason things escalated this far is my own bad luck. Otherwise, it wouldn't have collapsed so spectacularly."

"Father-in-law, no, Emperor Jurai. As the Academy representative, I believe Seina-kun is correct."

"I appreciate you saying that, but..."

Whether this accident was caused by Seina's bad luck or by Yuzaki changed the nature of the issue. Seina's position was as a GP captain belonging to the Academy, and moreover, he was also half affiliated with the military. Depending on the circumstances, this could potentially escalate into a major diplomatic incident. However, since Jurai recognized Seina as an equal during the "trial ceremony," taking advantage of that goodwill felt unnatural for a Juraian.

"You said I was like family, didn't you?"

"Ugh!!... Well, well, I'm beat!"

Seina's words effortlessly dissolved the Emperor of Jurai's pride and stubbornness. Faced with such sincere words from Seina, he had no choice but to admit defeat.

"It's a good thing Misaki isn't here."

"Truly."

Seto and the others nodded in unison. Even Azusa was on the verge of tears, and Misaki would be like a big dog excited to see her beloved master for the first time in days.

"Then, we shall accept Seina-dono's kind offer. Airi, take Seina-dono to the hospital."

"Kiriko-chan and the others, please prepare for the luncheon." Seto called out to Kiriko and the others, who were about to follow Seina.

"But we have to look after Seina-chan!" Kiriko glared at Seto, as if warning her.

If they were separated from Seina again here, who knew what might happen? The others felt the same way.

"Then I'll accompany him. My wife also said she wanted to speak with Seina-dono."

"Right, Tatsua, I'll leave it to you. And have the head maid and the ladies-in-waiting withdraw. Is that okay?" Azusa ordered Seto, wanting Kiriko and the others to feel at ease.

"Understood. We'll be counting on you." Kiriko said, confirming Seto's reluctant nod, and bowed to Tatsua.

"Ah! Wait a moment!" Yuzaki began chasing after Airi and the others as they started moving.

"Yuzaki-dono, is something wrong?"

Ignoring Tatsua's question, she peered into Seina's capsule.

"I'm truly sorry for what I did, Seina-dono. ...So, I have a question for you. Would you marry my daughter?"

"Huh? ...What do you mean...?"

Seina's stunned words were suddenly cut off.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

The shocked cries of everyone present drowned out his words.

"H-hey, Yuzaki! Our daughter was just born!"

"Just born?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'm talking about when she's all grown up and ripe." Yuzaki flashed a bright smile.

"Wait, what do you mean 'ripe'...?"

"I'll make sure to prepare her properly in every way..."

Yuzaki looked around at Kiriko and the others, "Well, just give me a seat at the end of the table," she smiled meaningfully.

"Hey, wait a minute, Yuzaki! Don't ignore me, her father, and decide things on your own!"

"It'll be fine once that child grows up and agrees, right?"

"Don't be ridiculous! You're trying to take this in a direction where people won't complain!"

"Ultimately, we'll respect her wishes."

“Hey, that's cheating, Yuzaki. The mission is over.”

"Mine is an official request. It's different from Seto-sama's."

"Hold on a second! First of all..."

Yuzaki, Seto, and Kiriko gathered in one spot and started arguing. With Juraian women like this, trying to stop them would only get you burned. Azusa signaled to Tatsua with his hand

to quickly take Seina away, then moved to a safe zone with Kanemitsu.

"...Does that mean my opinion is being ignored?" Seina said, looking up at Tatsua.

"Getting involved in that is reckless, no matter how you look at it."

"...Seems so."

Watching the women argue, Seina sensed a danger far more potent than the massive collapse earlier and closed his eyes with a sigh.

Seina was admitted to the imperial family's exclusive hospital in Tenju's upper levels, where he underwent another detailed scan. The diagnosis was identical to the one he received on-site. After that, the treatment concluded with rapidly cultivated skin making any visible injury completely invisible.

"Well then, I'm off to see Kamidake. If I stay away too long, Tennyo-chan might find out about Seina-kun."

"Doesn't Tennyo-chan know?"

"If Tennyo-chan got involved in that commotion earlier, it would be a real mess. Anyway, all this chaos must have worn you out. Rest for a little while."

"Understood."

"Yamada Seina-sama, you have a visitor. What should we do?"

A nurse in a Juraian uniform called out to Seina. True to its royal-exclusive nature, it didn't feel like a hospital at all, more like a hotel's royal suite.

"A visitor?"

"Ah, it's probably my wife."

"The one you told me about when heading to the dueling grounds. Understood. Please let her in."

"Understood."

A few minutes after the nurse's footsteps faded, a woman approached with a slightly hurried pace, looking as if she couldn't sit still. Airi moved toward the screen to greet her.

"Oh, it's been a while."

"Airi-sama! It's been a long time!"

Airi and the woman's voices could be heard from behind the screen.

"I suppose my explanation alone wasn't enough to ease your worries."

"No, not at all..."

Airi's slightly teasing tone contrasted sharply with the desperately earnest voice denying it.

"It's fine. Coming here was the right choice. Seina-kun will surely ease your worries. Well then, I'll leave the rest to you."

As Airi's footsteps faded away, the woman emerged from behind the screen, her face tense. But the moment she saw Tatsua, her expression softened with relief. She had exactly the aura Seina had imagined from her voice.

"Seina-dono, allow me to introduce you. This is my wife, Masaki Mahma Jurai." Tatsua took Mahma by the hand and led her over to Seina.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Yamada Seina."

"Heh." Mahma looked at Seina and smiled with relief.

"?"

"I-I'm so sorry! I was just so happy to see you were exactly as Sasami-sama described!"

Seeing Seina's puzzled look, Mahma quickly explained, then began to cry as if overcome with emotion.

At the Kamiki Family Guest House, preparations were underway for Seina and his crew’s luncheon. Seto, Minaho, and Ringo were inspecting the progress in each department. With Seina's arrival, every area was bustling with energy, but the kitchen in particular was more like a festival than anything they had ever seen before.

"The chefs seem quite delighted."

"Probably because it's been a while since they've had the chance to cook without worrying about the cost."

"Ah, I see."

At Minaho's words, Seto glanced at Ringo and nodded in understanding.

"I did my best to set a budget that the head chef could work with within his capabilities!" Ringo retorted, sheepishly.

"...Well, the frugal cookbook I wrote based on that experience became a bestseller, so you never know what might turn out for the best in life, do you?"

"The customers really like it!"

"Oh, really? The most common reaction was, 'So that's actually edible?'"

“Minaho-sama! ...Never mind! I'll tell the head chef to serve Seto-sama and Minaho-sama his latest budget-friendly dish.”

““Huh!?”” Seto and Minaho's faces instantly drained of color.

"Lately, the head chef has been getting interested in exotic ingredients, so he was having trouble finding people to taste-test them."

That’s because the head chef’s budget-friendly dishes had, in the end, become indistinguishable from survival food. And if you added the fact that they were exotic delicacies, there was no telling what ingredients were actually being used. If you were to find out by accident, you might not be able to eat for quite some time.

"Right, Minaho-chan! Apologize to Ringo-chan!"

"Ringo-chan. What do you think of someone who so casually discards their subordinates like that?"

"She used us as bait to lure out Seina-sama earlier too."

"Huh!?... Oh no! I have other business to attend to! Minaho-chan, Ringo-chan, I'll leave the rest to you!" Seto, easily cornered by her gang, hastily fled.

The two watched her retreating figure with laughter.

"Hehe... But I was so happy when Seina-sama came to our rescue."

"I was moved too."

"Being used as bait wasn't all bad, you know. The only real pity is that the event after being rescued got canceled, right?"

"And then Yuzaki-sama's daughter beat us to it..."

"She said she’d like her to be included, even if it was a minor role."

"Did you notice? That girl is Seina-kun's first official betrothed."

"Oh! Now that you mention it, that's right. Kiriko-san and the others must be on pins and needles."

"Kiriko-chan and the others aside, what about Ringo-chan?"

"That question should be directed to Minaho-sama. For now, I'm perfectly satisfied with the 'trial ceremony'."

With that, Ringo set off towards the next location. Minaho watched as she walked away satisfied.

"Well... I suppose things will just have to take their course. Right then! I suppose I should start thinking a little more seriously too!" Minaho placed her hand on the Imperial Jade Seina had given her and began walking after Ringo.

Seina and Mahma were talking on the terrace with its beautiful view.

"Sasami-chan's life on Earth, you ask...?"

"She grew up in a difficult position. When her elder sister, Aeka-sama, ran away, she worried about her and followed after her... That's why she's always considerate of others and rarely reveals her true feelings. With Sasami-sama, I can only communicate by letter; meeting in person is impossible."

"And that's why it's me?"

"Yes. That's why..." Mahma stared at Seina with pleading eyes.

"The Sasami-chan I saw was a very lively and cheerful girl. True, before Noike-san arrived, she managed all the household chores at Tenchi-senpai's place, so sometimes she didn't seem like a girl her age. But... everyone there is a good person." Seina began speaking earnestly, trying his best to convey his feelings.

He believed that if Mahma got to know Tenchi, her worries about Sasami would disappear. He explained Tenchi's character in detail, drawing from his own upbringing and how the Masaki family had accepted him.

“And then there's Ryo-Ohki—Sasami-chan always brings her along in her cabbit form when she comes down to the village...”

Having always been shunned by others, Seina was adept at sensing negative emotions in people. However, he couldn't detect any of those negative emotions in Sasami's descriptions of Tenchi and the others. Of course, she sometimes complained about the annoying aspects of those she lived with, but even then, there was a hint of enjoyment in her demeanor. Therefore, Seina was confident that by describing Sasami's usual behavior in detail, he could alleviate Mahma's anxieties, as Mahma knew Sasami well. And, as Seina had hoped, it was gradually beginning to have an effect.

(...Huh?)

Tatsua, who had been observing Seina and Mahma from a distance, noticed his wife's expression gradually softening.

When it came to Sasami, Mahma worried excessively, fretting over every little thing. This stemmed from having cared for Sasami since childhood and from the fact that the girl, still unable to stand on her own, had slipped away from her grasp. Mahma's grief upon learning Sasami had run away with Aeka surpassed even that of her parents and her maternal grandfather, Utsutsumi. She joined the search parties that were organized, not just once or

twice, but countless times. She poured her own money into the search until she was nearly bankrupt, using every connection she had, desperately trying to track down Sasami's whereabouts.

(I couldn't protect Jurai. Mahma couldn't stop Sasami-sama from running away from home...)

Tatsua, who knew Mahma's pain and situation, tried to protect her from the blame of others and herself, which became the catalyst that brought the two together.

Azusa, Funaho, and Misaki supported Tatsua's marriage to Mahma, who was neither royalty nor an aristocrat. Tatsua was demoted from Imperial Family Masaki for taking responsibility for Ryoko's intrusion. Then, Mahma was adopted by Masaki, and the two were allowed to marry.

Once the situation stabilized, Tatsua was permitted to return to the Imperial Family. Mahma, due to her connection as Misaki's tutor, became an adopted daughter of the Kamiki family first. She was now treated as a member of the Masaki Imperial Family alongside Tatsua.

(The joy that Sasami-sama was safe and the frustration of not being able to meet her in person to confirm this made Mahma stubborn... but Seina-dono is such a kind person.)

Seina's honest heart—a boy who grew up unwarped despite his incredible probability bias—and his earnest desire to tell Mahma as much as possible about Sasami's situation, were unraveling Mahma's heart more than Seina's words alone. Of course, Seina's explanation, as intended, was easier for Mahma to understand than the words of Sasami or Airi.

"I see... Thanks to you, I now have a clearer picture of that household. Thank you so much, Seina-dono." Mahma bowed deeply to Seina, looking completely composed.

"Well then, I suppose it's time for me to take my leave."

"Yes."

"Seina-dono, I just heard from Airi-sama that the decision has been made to scrap the Kamidake."

"What? Is that true!?"

"I think Airi-sama will explain the details."

"I-I see."

"Well then, thank you for everything."

Tatsua bowed once, then Mahma kept glancing back at Seina and bowing repeatedly as she walked away. Seina watched until they disappeared from sight, then quickly contacted Airi.

"Oh, are you done talking?"

"Yes. More importantly, Airi-san, is it true about the Kamidake will be scrapped?" Seina seemed unable to sit still and asked Airi.

"Hmm? Oh, you heard it from Tatsua-dono. It's true."

"Why!? Is it really that bad?"

His face was filled with anxiety, as if someone Seina knew had been rushed to the hospital with serious injuries.

"You were told this would be the last time you would be testing it, right?"

"Yes. But—"

"Ultimately, data logger ships are meant to be dismantled for detailed structural analysis. Well, I understand how you feel, Seina-kun, but the 'Kamidake' project ends here. This decision is final."

That was an order from the Academy's Chairman.

Seina replied sadly, yet with a clear tone, "Understood."

"Good."

"Now, Chairman Airi, I have a request." Seina lifted his face with a serious expression and looked at Airi.

Click, clack—— the sound of footsteps on the hard wooden floor echoed through the dimly lit, vast dock.

The Kamidake dock was quiet when Seina arrived, not a soul in sight. The hull, illuminated by the dim light, was covered in scratches and grime. With the power shut down, it looked lifeless, like a corpse laid out in a mortuary, an empty shell.

"Kamidake..." After uttering those words, Seina fell silent, his gaze fixed on his ship.

Kamidake had taught him much. It was the ship that fought alongside him, protected him, and helped him realize his dream. Even if he was merely a ceremonial captain, responsible only for setting the course, Kamidake was Seina's first ship and his comrade-in-arms.

Wiping away the tears welling up in his eyes, Seina saluted.

"Thank you, Kamidake."

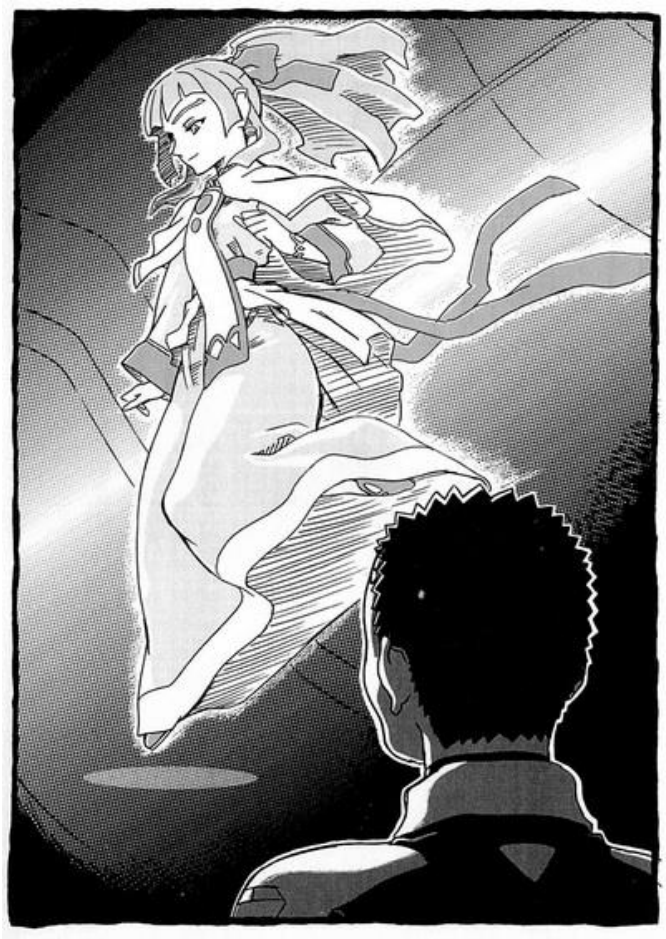
"You're welcome."

The voice sounded exactly as if Kamidake had spoken it.

"Huh? Wha—!? Kamidake spoke?"

As Seina panicked, a girl with pale, young-leaf-colored hair came into view. She stood atop the highest point of the scaffolding built around Kamidake and smiled at Seina.

"Who are you?"



But the girl didn't answer, descending the stairs with light steps. She looked about Sasami's age? Yet there was something about her that didn't feel like she belonged to this world.

"Are you... Kamidake?"

Even to himself, it was a strange question—Seina thought, yet he couldn't help asking. The girl seemed like some kind of spirit that had slipped away from Kamidake. But she didn't answer. She only approached, maintaining that gentle smile directed at Seina.

"Are you Kamidake?" When the girl reached Seina, he asked again.

"Yes."

Seina didn't entertain any practical thoughts about whether it was true or false, or whether she might be the terminal body of a computer unit like the Ryo-Ohki. He simply accepted her words.

"I can't save you. So at least... thank you. I wanted to thank you..."

"...Don't forget."

"Huh!?"

"If you don't forget me, if I remain in your memory, I can continue to exist."

As if weightless, the girl swiftly flew backward.

"I can exist forever in the Astral Sea. I can fly with you." As she spoke, the girl danced, her pale, young-leaf-colored hair swaying, her clothes glowing faintly like fireflies.

(...Beautiful)

Her dance, like Kamidake itself performing a requiem, was fantastical, sorrowful, and

beautiful, stirring Seina's heart.

Beep. The silence was broken by a ringtone, "Seina-kun, it's almost time," Airi's voice signaled the end of the dance.

"Heh heh."

With a look of disappointment, Seina watched as the girl slowly approached him. She looked up at his face.

"……"

Though she hadn't been told anything, Seina knelt down and brought his face close to the girl's.

"Goodbye."

The girl lightly kissed Seina's lips, then ran straight into the darkness beyond.

"Seina-kun, can you hear me?"

"...Huh? Ah, yes... I can hear you."

Distracted by Airi's voice, Seina momentarily took his eyes off the girl. He stood up and looked back toward her, but she was already gone.

"...I'll be right there."

Whether it had been an illusion or someone's prank didn't matter. He felt satisfied that he had been able to properly say goodbye to his friend Kamidake.

"Oh? Did something good happen?" Airi, who had been waiting in the hallway, said as soon as she saw Seina's face.

"Huh?"

"You look so much more refreshed."

"Because I was able to properly say goodbye."

"That's good to hear."

Smiling as she said this, Airi tossed something resembling a volleyball towards Seina. Just as he reflexively reached out to catch it, the ball stopped dead in midair.

"Hey, Airi, don't just suddenly throw me!"

"NB!?" Seina's expression was a bit conflicted upon recognizing it as NB.

"I deleted the suspicious programs and adjusted it properly, so it shouldn't do anything weird anymore."

"...Really?" Seina looked at Airi with a skeptical gaze.

"Yeah, probably."

"Really?"

"Yeah, probably."

"……Well, whatever." Seina decided further questioning would be a waste of time.

"I'm going to go discuss the transfer arrangements for Kamidake. I'll be at the luncheon, so you go ahead and head back. NB will show you where it is."

"Understood."

Watching Airi walk off toward the direction Kamidake was stored, Seina turned to look at NB.

"Master, I'm really sorry for all the trouble I've caused you."

"Yeah... well, given the situation, it couldn't be helped. Anyway, everyone's safe, so let's call it good."

"Yeah. Right now, it's more important to move forward than dwell on regrets."

"Yeah. Then, lead the way."

"Got it."

NB began to fly unsteadily, leading the way for Seina.

Chapter Ten: The Lunch Show

"Oh, Seina-chan. You'll need to change clothes before eating, so let's take a bath first."

Waiting for Seina when he returned to the guest room were Tsukiko and another senior staff member. Of course, it was Kuisu Panta disguised as Tsukiko...

"No, um... I can go in by myself."

Even after learning the truth, the Tsukiko before his eyes undeniably looked like the real Tsukiko.

"Hey, Seina-chan. I know it's embarrassing, but this is part of our job. If we don't get you dressed in a way that won't embarrass us when we take you out, we'll get scolded. So think of it as us helping you, okay?"

"...I'm the one who needs help!"

"Don't be so shy. If you feel aroused, you can go all the way without holding back."

Seina recognized the voice of the other senior employee.

"No way!?"

Seina peered under the senior maid's hood, trying to confirm her face.

"Oh, no, Seina-chan. This hood is like a skirt. For a lady-in-waiting, having someone peek inside is more embarrassing than being stripped naked."

"NB! What about voice verification?"

"No doubt about it, it's Seto-san."

"Tch! Airi-chan returned the ball way too quickly!"

"I'm not a ball!"

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped now that we've been found out. Come on everyone, this is your last chance!"

As Seto removed her hood and gave the signal, a huge number of ladies-in-waiting, so many it was hard to believe where they'd all been hiding, from under trees and in closets, from the ceiling and behind sofas—emerged in a large group and rushed toward Seina.

"Let's undress Seina-dono and escort him to the bath~~~♡"

"Yesssssss!"

At Seto's words, the ladies-in-waiting let out a chorus of shrieks. In the blink of an eye, they stripped Seina's clothes off and began removing their own garments.

"Hey, you lot! Cut it out already!"

"Oh, NB-chan. You can join in too, you know."

"Huh? No, but..."

There are so many of us, no one will notice. Come on, hurry up!"

"……" NB silently assumed Kirche's form in a position hidden from Seina's view.

"Tsukiko-chan, Kiriko-chan, and the others are still in the main bath, right?"

"And since they're changing, no one will interrupt us."

"Okay! Alright, is everyone ready?"

"Yeeeees!"

× × ×

The Kamidake crew members, plus Elma, Minaho, and Ringo, who joined them partway, were bathing in the nearly park-sized communal bath, practically having it all to themselves.

"Heyyyy, are you okay? Kiriko?"

Amane flicked some water at Kiriko, who was slumped against a large rock, completely drained.

"I'm tired, so just leave me alone for a bit."

"Because you were playing without me and Elma!"

"We weren't playing!"

"Well, thanks to all that effort, Seina-kun's first-time plan failed, so isn't that just fine?"

"Oh? What? Did Elma want to be Seina's first?"

"I did suggest we could handle it personally, though..."

"Hey, Elma..." Kiriko glared at Elma with a face cold enough to freeze boiling water.

"Come on, calm down, Kiriko."

"Ultimately, it's about teaching him resistance to seduction and sexual pleasure, right? The quickest and safest method is to create a chastity barrier to prevent sexual intercourse, isn’t it?"

"Ah!?"

The darkest place is under the candlestick, Kiriko and the others were stunned by such an obvious blind spot.

"Well, that's a bit of a cruel method in itself. But since he's been around Amane-san and Gyokuren-san and has managed to keep his sanity somewhat intact, I'd say his resistance to seduction tactics is pretty high."

"There was a guard dog named Kiriko, but... it's not like there weren't any chances."

"Alternatively, couldn't we just put that personal data from back then into Seina-kun's NB and use it?"

"Oh? Personal data from that time?" Minaho leaned in, her face full of interest.

"Airi-sama put Kiriko-san’s and our personal data into the NB. And it was incredibly well-made too."

"Really, Mom..."

"Since Airi-sama is here anyway, why not put Minaho-sama and Ringo-sama's in there too?"

"Don't be ridiculous! If you use the personal information of a Juraian royal princess like that, you'll be charged with lèse majesté and sent to prison for life!"

"Just kidding. So basically, if we'd used a chastity barrier from the start, that would've been the end of it, huh? Ahahahaha."

"Anyway, time's up, so never mind..." Kiriko clutched her head and leaned back against the rock again.

"Time's up... By the way, Minaho-sama, where is Seto-sama?" Amane looked around and suddenly felt uneasy.

"Sh said she had something to do in the middle of preparing lunch....Ahhh!"

Before Minaho could finish her sentence, Ringo had already sent a confirmation message somewhere.

"Minaho-sama, I can't get in touch with the girls from accounting!"

"Surely not, at this critical moment..."

Just then, a circuit diagram for a teleportation gate appeared on the rock next to Kiriko, who had stood up, and a naked Seina burst out from it.

"Eek!"

Seina tumbled into the bathtub with such force that he ended up hugging Kiriko.

"Ki-Kiriko-san?"

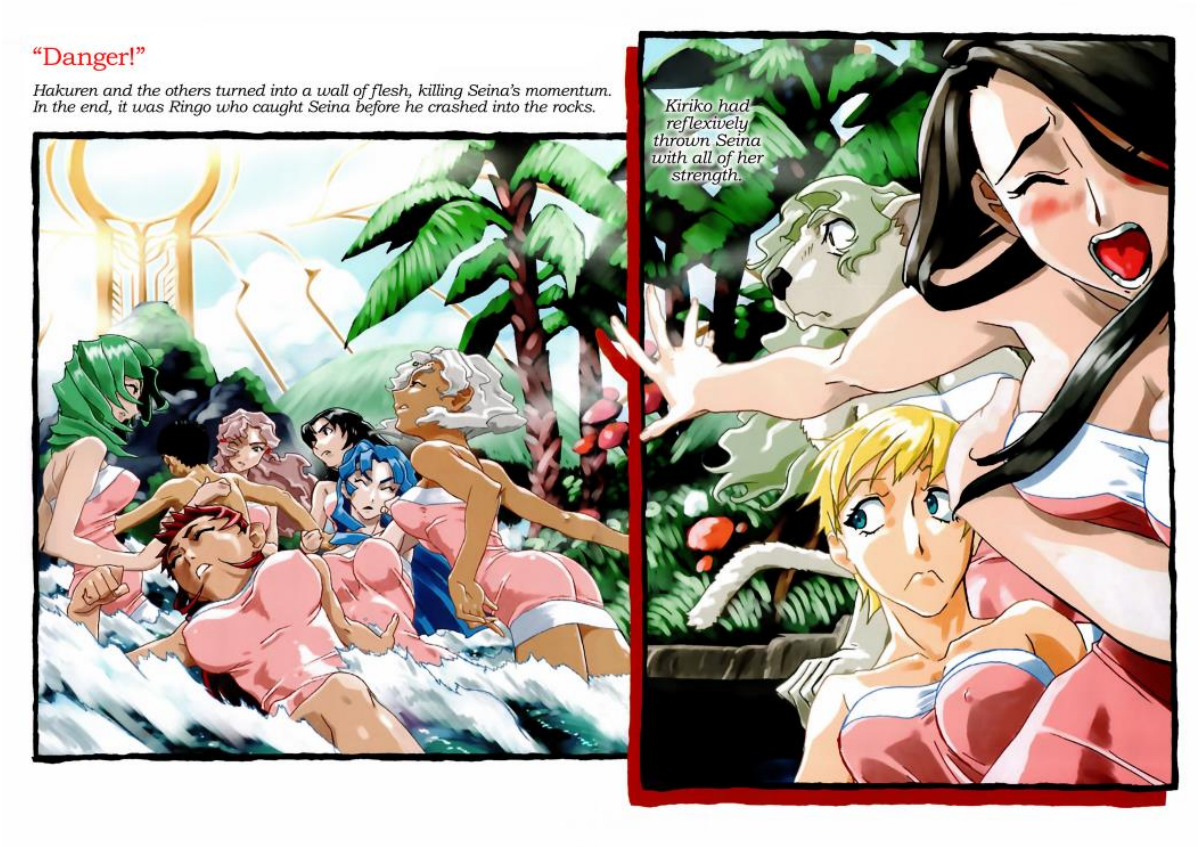
Kiriko's face right before his eyes, the softness and warmth of her skin pressed directly against his own, the curve of her breasts and the dip of her waist... Who could blame Seina in that moment?

"Se-se-se... Seina-cha...!

Feeling Seina's thing against her lower body, Kiriko, overcome with embarrassment, reflexively shoved Seina away with all her might.

"Watch out!"

Hakuren and the others turned into a wall of flesh, killing Seina's momentum. In the end, it was Ringo who caught Seina before he crashed into the rocks.


"Danger!"
Hakuren and the others turned into a wall of flesh, killing Seina's momentum. In the end, it was Ringo who caught Seina before he crashed into the rocks.
Kiriko had reflexively thrown Seina with all of her strength.

"S-sorry. You saved me..."

One crisis passed, only for another to arise. Who could blame Seina in that moment?

"S-Seina-sama..."

Fortunately (?), unlike with Kiriko, the urge to save Seina prevailed, and Ringo didn't push him away. But Ringo's arms were frozen, holding Seina tightly without moving.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!" Ringo's face turned bright red as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Ahahahaha, Seina-chan, wait!

The very moment Ringo caught Seina, Seto and Kuisu-Tsukiko, who had just emerged from the gate, bumped right into Kiriko.

"Huh? Why is Kiriko-chan here...?"

"This is bad, Seto-sama... This is the public bath."

"Come to think of it, I forgot to tell Sasami-chan to stop messing with the gates..."

Just as Seto and Kuisu-Tsukiko grasped their predicament, the female clerks from the accounting department began bursting out of the gate one after another.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Kiriko's anger, now fully grasping the situation, exploded without restraint. In the next instant, the large bathhouse became a cauldron of utter chaos and screams.

The luncheon welcoming Seina was held in the narrowest yet most luxurious dining hall of the guesthouse. Being an informal gathering, the semi-standing luncheon allowed guests to move freely in search of desired dishes, have nearby people serve them food, and enjoy conversation. This was a remnant from Jurai's pirate days.

The intricately crafted wooden tables, masterpieces by Jurai's Living National Treasures, were laden with lavish, extravagant dishes. The premium beverages included Shinju Sake and even juice. Despite a menu unmatched even for state guests, an extremely awkward atmosphere hung over the gathering. And no wonder—Kiriko was the only one present who had emerged unscathed from that bathhouse. Everyone else was wrapped in repair tape or bandages. And above all, Kiriko's displeasure weighed heavily on the atmosphere.

In an attempt to lighten the mood a little in the wake-like atmosphere, the happy ladies-in-waiting, who had become engaged thanks to Kanemitsu's scheme, poured liquor or juice into celebratory glasses, and Seto, the hostess of the event, picked up a glass to lead the toast.

"Thank you all so much for your hard work. Seina-dono, I would like to express my gratitude once again."

"...No, not at all."

"There's no need for long speeches between us. Please, everyone, raise your glasses."

Everyone except Kiriko took a glass.

"Now, cheers!"

Just as Seto led the toast and everyone was about to raise their glasses, Kiriko suddenly grabbed the bottle of Shinju Sake, sliced the neck clean off with a hand blade, and began chugging it straight from the bottle.

"...Kiriko-chan!?"

Of course, Tsunami could force someone to chug the Shinju Sake. But even Seto had never witnessed such a reckless act as downing the entire bottle in one go.

"Whoa... No, no!"

Seto almost clapped in admiration, but stopped herself in a panic. Since this was clearly meant as a dig at her, showing any enjoyment of it could easily set off another explosion.

BANG!!

Slamming the empty bottle onto the table, Kiriko collapsed face-first onto it and remained

motionless. Reading the room, the happy ladies-in-waiting and the attendees clinging to that cheerful atmosphere, she'd decided to wrap things up quickly.

"That cost us an absolute fortune, didn't it?"

With that, Kanemitsu handed Seto a dish of food while staring at the empty bottle.

"Which is more precious, this scene or the Shinju Sake?"

"I see. That's one way to look at it."

"We still have some fruit juice. This one was sent by Azusa-dono."

"Why juice?"

"As a thank-you to Seina-dono, I suppose?"

"Oh, there's no way they'd send something that the person in question can't drink... Well, I'll have some and mix it with some sake."

Thanks to Kanemitsu and Seto's exchange, the atmosphere in the room returned to normal. However, the mood between Seina and the women who had been in the bath remained decidedly awkward. Especially Seina and Ringo, who had ended up embracing for a while – just meeting each other's gaze made them both turn bright red.

Seeing this, Gyokuren quietly approached Minaho.

"?"

Minaho looked puzzled, but her face flushed red when she saw Gyokuren pour something resembling white tartar sauce over the fish fry. Amane, Elma, Hakuren, and Karen, noticing this, instantly understood what had happened to Seina in the large bath.

"I see. So that's why Minaho-sama quickly pushed Seina and Ringo-sama into the bath."

Amane and the others who noticed began to gather around Minaho.

"Minaho-sama... you saw it, didn't you?"

"Because I was closest to him."

"What about Ringo-sama?"

"I don't think she noticed. Anyway, we'll pretend we didn't notice either. Especially Gyokuren."

"Of course. We can't let Seina-sama be embarrassed."

"In that situation, it was unavoidable, right? Especially for a young boy like Seina."

"...I just hope it doesn't leave him with some weird trauma."

"Perhaps it's best to let him experience it sooner rather than later?" Seto was stuffing her cheeks with fried fish while sitting within girl's circle.

"That's true... Wait, Seto-sama! When did you get here!?"

"Keep your secrets where no can see them."

Seto slowly and suggestively licked the white sauce from the corner of her mouth, then grinned. Only then did Amane and the others realize everyone else's gaze was fixed on them. Fortunately, Seina and Ringo, the subjects of their attention, seemed unaware of why Amane and the others had gathered.

"Now then, the feast is in full swing. Hey, Seina-dono!" Seto placed the plate back on the table and stood up, turning toward Seina.

"Don't you want to know what was inside the package you brought?"

"The contents of the package? Well... of course I'd like to know. I've been wondering why those pirates were chasing us so relentlessly... But is it really okay?"

"Yes, but keep it between us. Come on, Kiriko-chan, wakey, wakey!"

Seto returned to her original spot and signaled to the ladies-in-waiting. They vanished from the area in an instant, and simultaneously, a secret wall materialized.

"Now then, ladies and gentlemen. This is what was inside that package~~~!"

With Seto's words, an image of a gaunt man who looked like he had a bad stomach spread across the entire table.

The room buzzed with murmurs as everyone looked at Seto, trying to gauge her intent.

"Does this person have something to do with the package?"

"Oh, sorry. This is a matchmaking photo for Amane-chan."

In that instant, everyone slumped, collapsing face-first onto the table.

"Huh!?"

"Ho ho ho, by the way, he's the same age as Amane-chan. He's the second son of a kimono wholesaler, and apparently he loves talking to little birds."

"Seriously... I'm not interested in any matchmaking meeting."

"Amane! That's not what we're talking about right now!"

"Haha, Kiriko, you're back to normal. Seto-sama, I don't care about any matchmaking, so let's get down to business."

"Eh? There's so much more!"

“Seto-sama!”

"Alright, alright. We'll talk about matchmaking later." Glared at by Kiriko, Seto reluctantly turned off the video.

What appeared next was something seed-like.

"...This isn't another 'wrong video' punchline, is it? Seto-sama?"

Across from the dumbfounded Amane, Kiriko's expression changed.

"Could it be... a Royal Tree seed!?"

“Correct. It’s a third-generation Royal Tree seed." Seto gave a small nod.

This time, the expressions of those present who were unaware of the situation also turned to shock.

"But why would such a thing be here? Aren't they supposed to be under strict security?"

"...Tens of thousands of years ago, when the Shank Guild was at its height, an incident occurred where an Imperial Ship was destroyed."

"An Imperial Ship!? You mean by the Shank Guild?"

"Yes. When Royal Trees are destroyed, they leave behind copies of themselves. This one had been missing ever since, but apparently Tarrant recently discovered it. He was probably searching for it secretly, just like Jurai."

"I see. If they were transporting this, pirates would definitely be hot on their trail."

"The master of this seed no longer exists in this world. If this seed sprouted and Tarrant, or some pirate, became its master, and if they succeeded in creating the next generation of seeds, it would have become an unimaginable threat to the Galactic Federation. So, Seina-dono, protecting this cargo meant protecting the Galactic Federation, and for us, it meant protecting our family."

"Damn it! Then get the Jurai fleet moving! No matter what problems there may be, it's better than letting it fall into Tarrant's hands!"

"Oh? I always had faith that you, Seina-dono, would protect it no matter what."

"Ugh!"

Seto's wooden delivery and smile left Amane and the others speechless.

"All's well that ends well! Oh yes, I must thank Ryoko-dono too."

"Me?"

"Getting this back was all thanks to the efforts of Ryoko-dono's companions. So, here’s a

surprise~~~!"

With that, the secret wall unlocked, and the ladies-in-waiting began preparing something.

"Now, Elma-sama, please take Ryoko-sama's place."

"Huh!? Wait!"

Unable to grasp the situation, Elma was practically dragged away by the ladies-in-waiting.

"What's happening?!"

"You'll have to wait and see. Now, everyone else, continue eating." Seto instructed, and Seina and the others resumed their meal.

About ten minutes later, the Secret Wall once again enveloped the entire venue. Then, a spotlight illuminated the stage, and Seto appeared solemnly, microphone in hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. We now present the moving reunion show, 'Where Are They Now?' And now, for our first guest! Please give them a big round of applause!"

Ignoring Seina and the others, who were speechless, applause and cheers began to rise from somewhere.

"Over here!"

Apparently losing patience with the guest's delay, Seto went to the wings and pulled Ryoko Balta, dressed in a gown, onto the stage.

"Seto-sama, why am I being made to wear this?" Ryoko clutched the plunging neckline of her dress, clearly flustered.

"First off, this crest belongs to the extinct Balta Guild's ruling family. Even though I bear their name as my surname, it's not something that should be used carelessly..."

"Now then, Ryoko-dono. Your grandfather is present at this venue today."

"What?! But I'm all alone in the world..."

A murmur rippled through the hall, mingled with Ryoko's bewildered voice. Whether she heard it or not, Seto snapped her fingers as a signal.

With a flash, spotlights illuminated a single point on the stage. Then, a moody enka-style song began blaring at full volume.

"There were battles, there were farewells. After centuries of hardship... the long-awaited moment has finally arrived! Singing with heartfelt emotion is this gentleman. Please welcome him!"

Overlapping Seto's introduction slightly, a middle-aged man rose up from beneath the stage

floor. The applause and cheers from the ladies-in-waiting grew even louder, and the man began to sing.

"……"

Ryoko and Seina, watching, gaped in astonishment, speechless as they watched the scene unfold.

The man's singing was remarkably good. Before they knew it, Seina and the others were drawn into the heartfelt melody. When his song ended, they found themselves clapping.

"Wh-why...?"

Ryoko pointed at the man bowing deeply toward the audience, her expression one of utter shock.

"Why is the leader of the Balta Guild, who was supposed to be destroyed, here?!"

The man responded to Ryoko's pointing finger with a V-sign and a broad smile.

"Ha ha ha! Balta has not perished, my great-grandchild."

"o＊\@!?＊＋＊￥@＊～～～～!!?" Ryoko was nearly in a state of delirium, her words making no sense.

Kiriko and the others in the audience were just as bewildered.

"Alright, alright, calm down."

Two barcode-like genetic data patterns appeared on the screen in the air.

"The top one is Ryoko-chan's genetic data. And the bottom one is the genetic data of Commander Balta registered in the GP's official database."

The two genetic data sets slid and overlapped. Then, a portion of them enlarged.

"There are many pirates bearing the Balta surname. But most of them are simply descendants of former Balta members..."

"Th-this is..."

"You understand the meaning of this data, right? Yes. You are the true heir to the name of Balta."

"I'm... Commander Balta? But, no way!?"

"No, Ryoko-sama is a direct descendant of Balta." Ryoko's second-in-command, who had appeared unnoticed, stepped into the spotlight.

"What does this mean!?"

"Ryoko-sama, your mother entrusted you to me. We raised you under a false identity to protect you from Da Ruma and Tarrant."

"Because if your true identity were discovered, you would have been killed."

Suddenly, an image projected beside her First Officer.

"Komachi Kyō!?? Wh-why?!"

"It shouldn't surprise you. I'll make deals with anyone if necessary. But back to the point: Da Ruma still hasn't caught on, but Tarrant seems to know. By then, though, you'd become too important to Da Ruma Guild for him to act carelessly... So they tried to eliminate you using Elma."

"So, the fact that I'm the great-granddaughter of Commander Balta... is that true?"

"That's how it is. Now then, regarding the appearance fee... I'll be counting on you."

Saying that, Komachi glanced briefly at Seina. Seina bowed reflexively. Komachi seemed about to say something, but instead raised her hand slightly and smiled before the image faded. But both Seina and Amane understood what Komachi had been about to say.

"Seems Seiryo-sensei's doing well, doesn't it?"

"Dammit! I'd forgotten about him, and now you go and remind me..."

"You've grown! You've grown so much...
"Your height!"
"Your breasts!"
Your buttocks!"
"Ohh! My precious great-grandchild."
As if overwhelmed with emotion, King Balta spread out his arms and ran towards Ryoko in order to hug her. Tears ran down his face as he rubbed his cheek against hers.

Seina and Amane whispered to each other.

"Hehe, does that satisfy you now?"

"Y-yes... Ah, but!"

"Oh! My precious great-granddaughter!"

As if overwhelmed with emotion, King Balta, spread his arms and ran towards Ryoko in order to hug her. Tears ran down his face as he rubbed his cheek against hers.

"You've grown so much! You've really grown so much... Your height! Your chest! Your butt!"

With a crunching sound, Ryoko's iron fist slammed into Commander Balta's

face.

"I absolutely cannot accept this!"

"To a grandfather, a granddaughter is always a granddaughter. It's the same thing."

"At my age, having my great-grandfather suddenly appear and grope my butt is unbearable!"

"Hmph, that was quite a punch with real power behind it. With that much fighting spirit, you pass as my heir."

The look he cast upon Ryoko was different from before—majestic and commanding, worthy of the name of Commander Balta.

"...Heir."

Slightly intimidated, Ryoko looked toward Seto as if escaping the pressure.

"Balta hasn't been destroyed. Currently, there's an autonomous state within Juraian territory governed by the Balta Commander-in-Chief... but once it's approved at the next Galactic Federation General Assembly, it's scheduled to become an independent monarchy."

"Seto-sama. So, Ryoko is... that is, the heir to the throne?"

"Eventually, yes. Even with Galactic Federation approval, it will still take time for the nation to stabilize, and there are many issues to resolve."

"Indeed. Even if Ryoko succeeds me, it's still some time off."

"But I don't deserve to be king..."

"I believe she possesses ample capability for it, First Officer?"

"Yes. As the head of the organization, Ryoko-sama's abilities are recognized by all. The rest is..."

"Is it just a matter of finding a suitable partner?"

The two glanced briefly at Seina.

"Wait a moment! I..."

"Now, now. There's no need to rush, is there? Commander Balta?" Seto interrupted their conversation.

It was a warning to Commander Balta, who was trying to force a hasty conclusion upon Seina.

"Right. Today, let’s just make Ryoko... recognize that she is a direct descendant of Balta."

"...But honestly, I'm confused. I... thought I was completely alone after my parents died."

"Take your time thinking it over. The room we're having built for you in the palace and your training as a lady-in-waiting will take a while. Plus, there's also the band's welcoming parade practice, ha ha ha."

"Well, no need to get too serious about it, right? If push comes to shove, you just have to produce a new heir. That branch doesn't seem to have dried up yet." Seeing Ryoko looking so serious, Amane couldn't help but crack a joke.

"Pfft! You're right. That's a good idea."

"Oh, that's true! In my younger days, I was known as 'Popular Bal-chan'! Even now, if I put my mind to it..."

Commander Balta rushed over to Amane and the others, placing his hands on their waists.

"Well now, young ladies, how about joining me for a dawn drive?"

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"Ryoko... I'll wait for you forever."

After that, Commander Balta pressed not only Amane and Hakuren, but also Minaho, Ringo, Tennyo, Kiriko, and even Airi for dates. Covered in bright red handprints like autumn leaves on his cheeks, he descended into the stage pit, teary-eyed and supported by his aide.

"It was supposed to be such a moving performance. Why did it turn into a comedy?"

"Because of that weird staging, right?"

"When you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas. If you're cut from the same cloth as Seto-sama, isn't it inevitable?"

Kanemitsu and the others piled on, adding insult to injury to Seto, who slumped her shoulders in defeat.

"Isn't it a relief it wasn't an official event? Thanks to it being private, no record will remain."

"Heh, but it's a shame. It was such a great stage performance. We should have recorded it."

"Airi-san. I filmed it. From start to finish."

"Whoa, NB, you're awesome!"

"Hey! We have a confidentiality agreement!" Seto frantically started chasing after NB.

"Ten years after the recognition of the independent Monarchy should be fine, right? This is definitely part of the Genesis Records too."

"I'll be sure to get my appearance fee, mind you. I'm the organizer, so I'll be getting royalties

too!"

"You cheapskate! That doesn't sound like something The Demon Princess of Jurai would say!"

"I've have an associate who's very particular about money!"

"Now then Seina-kun, you and your team will have your next mission soon, so let's go. Come on, Ringo-chan too."

Minaho ignored Airi, Seto, and NB's bickering. She quickly left the scene with Seina and the others, comforting Ringo, who was feeling down after Seto's words.

Chapter Eleven: Production

The small boat carrying Seina and his team sped across the open sea, not a single island in sight.

"I'm sorry. You didn't get to relax much after all."

"Don't worry about it. We were just here to deliver the package anyway."

"But what exactly is this next mission? Kamidake is unusable now, and besides..." Kiriko, who knew the significance of venturing into Juraian waters, looked slightly uneasy.

The maritime city ahead was a place forbidden to ordinary humans.

"You know Ryo-Ohki-chan came to Jurai on an errand for Washu-sama, right?"

"Yes. I know. But?"

"The cargo she brought is related to this new mission. Also, Hakuren and the other three will be removed from this mission. Keep that in mind."

"But then, what about protecting Seina-sama?!" Hakuren's voice carried a hint of panic that stemmed not from a sense of duty toward the mission, but from personal feelings.

"That's fine."

"Then, are we returning to Seto-sama's side?"

"Only for the duration of this mission. Just three more days of patience. After that, you'll return to Seina-kun's escort duty."

"Understood."

At Minaho's words, not just Hakuren, but everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

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After arriving at the floating city, Minaho led Seina and the others through several gates before arriving in front of a giant door. It seemed Minaho was the biometric key for the door, and as Minaho stood on the key plate, a biometric scan began. A few minutes later, the giant door transformed into a teleportation gate.

"Now, let’s go inside."

Leading the way, Minaho entered a gate resembling a water surface. Beyond it lay a space like a massive aquarium, containing a cylindrical tank that must have been a hundred meters wide and three hundred meters high.

"The Imperial Ship adjustment tank!" Kiriko said with a growl.

"Yes, that's right. This is the Imperial Ship dedicated adjustment facility."

"There's something inside, isn't there?" Elma approached the tank with interest.

But inside, it was dark, and only faint silhouettes seemed to float within.

"What's the purpose of bringing us here? Does it have anything to do with our mission?"

"Don't be so wary, Kiriko-chan. This is a present from Jurai to Seina-kun."

"For me?"

"No way! ...But wait, the Imperial Ship ceremony is supposed to start with the Tree Selection ritual."

"You're right. This isn't an Imperial Ship."

As if answering Kiriko, a girl's voice came from somewhere. Seina recognized that voice.

Kiriko and the others looked toward the voice. On a slightly elevated walkway, the girl he'd seen at Kamidake Dock was staring intently into the aquarium.

"Who is that?"

"She's connected to this mission."

"That girl?"

As Kiriko and the others' looked at her, the girl slowly turned to face them. Her pale, young-leaf-green hair swayed gently despite the still air, and a faint light, like fireflies, illuminated her entire body. Everyone except Seina was mesmerized by the sight, frozen in place as if paralyzed.

"Heh heh."

A solemn atmosphere dominated the space. The girl descended the stairs with steps as light as if gravity had vanished, dancing down the stairs. It was a sight that could only be described as the descent of a god.

"We meet again."

Ignoring Kiriko and the others, the girl walked straight toward Seina.

"You are... Kamidake?"

"That child has left. I am Neeju. Neeju Na Melmas." Neeju whispered then threw herself into Seina's arms.

"!!"

The moment that happened, Kiriko and the others snapped out of their paralysis.

"Seina-chan, that girl!?"

At that moment, not just Kiriko, but every woman present

——She’s the enemy!

That's what they realized.

"Heh heh. Hey, Seina-nii-chan. What stands here is an existence equal to the Imperial Ship... no, perhaps surpassing it. And this child was born to meet you."

"Me?"

"Heh heh." Neeju looked at Minaho as if giving a signal.

"Yes... this is Seina-kun's ship."

As she spoke, lights illuminated the tank, revealing the form of an alien ship. Four crystal plates, shaped like narrow strips, were joined at three points around the central unit.

"Ah, those plates... Could they be...?"

The smoky quartz-like plates looked exactly like something he had seen just yesterday.

"Yes, this ship is Professor Washu's new vessel. The one Ryo-Ohki-chan brought us."

"Amazing... So this is what she meant by 'equivalent to an Imperial Ship'."

"This is... my ship. But..."

Imperial Ships were the pinnacle of ships in this world. A ship of equal standing, built by the legendary Philosopher, must also be considered the pinnacle. For it to become his... that was just too big a story.

"This kind of thing must cost a fortune in taxes and maintenance fees, right? There's no way I could afford it on my salary."

"Somehow, that's painfully realistic."

The atmosphere they'd worked so hard to build up was instantly ruined, and even Neeju could only manage a wry smile.

"I was hoping you'd just be happy about it..."

"Ahh! I'm sorry, Minaho-sama. But even on Earth, the only thing I could afford was a used bicycle... Suddenly getting a top-tier spaceship? That's just too much..."

"Well, I guess that's more like Seina."

"Yeah."

Amane and Kiriko exchanged glances and smiled wryly.

"All procedural issues have been cleared. The same goes for tax issues. I think you'll figure that out soon enough. Also, this ship is basically capable of self-repair anywhere, whether it's the sea or a lake, as long as there's a certain amount of water like here. The only time it will need maintenance is if you install some auxiliary parts later. Of course, since it's fully functional with just this, that kind of thing won't be necessary most of the time. Also, Washu-sama will be collecting data and checking it regularly, so you don't have to worry."

"Uh, ok..."

Despite all the talk, it seemed they were at least considering Seina's financial situation.

"This ship is a reward for the bounties and other compensation you received for helping capture the pirates after you went into space, so don't worry about it. Besides, Tenchi was worried about you after hearing about you and spoke to Washu-sama on your behalf. Washu-sama also had a reason to build this ship for you... Well, it was more of scientific curiosity. Given that she is a legendary Philosopher, I think my mother and the others can probably guess what I mean."

"Well, um... that's..."

For the sake of scientific interest, they spared no effort, wasted no resources, and cared not for the inconvenience caused to others—that was the philosopher.

"What will Seina-kun unleash with this ship...? Everyone, including Seto-sama, is interested in that. So... if you don't want to be a guinea pig, you do have the option to refuse... Well, technically, anyway."

"Accept it... no, embrace it. Even before this child is born, she accepted Seina-nii-chan as her master."

"...Okay. I get it." Seina nodded at Minaho and Neeju's earnest gazes.

He could feel their painstaking efforts to make it easier for him to accept it.

"Thank you. I'll gratefully accept it."

"Good. Then, please give this ship a code name, a name."

"...The name... has already been decided." Seina looked up at the ship and declared, "Kamidake. This one's name is Kamidake!"

As if responding to Seina's voice, Kamidake's crystal glowed, beginning to awaken as if a soul had entered it. Reacting to the crystal's energy, the water around the ship began to bubble, like an infant struggling to emerge from its mother's amniotic fluid.

"Now let's go, into space! This kid wants to fly too!"

Kamidake was now experiencing the moment of awakening.

【Tenchi Muyo! GXP Volume 7: The End】

Afterword

Note: We recommend reading this Afterword Theater after the main text.

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Afterword Theater Part 4

"……Thank you for telling me all this……"

The day after learning that Seina and Kiriko, who had gone missing with Kamidake, were safe, Tsukiko was stunned into silence when her senior colleague's friend told her that Kuisu Panta had disguised himself as her and relayed the exchange she'd had with Seina. She hung up the phone in shock.

"...No, no, no, no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no!” Tsukiko cried out, overwhelmed by shame.

"No way, there’s no way! Kuisu-sama couldn't possibly know such a thing! There's no way she could know!"

Tsukiko couldn't sit still any longer. She sprang to her feet and began pacing the living room like a caged animal. Sometimes quickening her pace, sometimes slowing, sometimes

hugging herself tightly with both arms, sometimes scratching her body indiscriminately.

Tsukiko endured her shame... but, "No way... No way... How do you know? How..."

Finally, as if her shame energy had run out, Tsukiko collapsed where she stood.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

When Tsukiko learned Seina had gone missing in Kamidake, she thought exactly the same thing Kuisu had told Seina.

——Why am I here? Why wasn't I there to die with you?

The feelings she had once confided to Kiriko—that if Seina ever returned to Earth, she would likely marry him someday—were genuine. But she had always believed that would only happen once Seina matured more, once her feelings for him had truly grown. Once he transitioned from someone she needed to protect to someone she could walk alongside.

(But...)

Tsukiko's face flushed bright red with embarrassment.

Through this incident, she realized that her feelings for Seina had grown within her without her noticing.

——From a boy, to a man.

This was surely connected to Seina leaving this land, gaining recognition from the distinguished figures Tsukiko knew, and finally becoming captain of a ship—albeit limited to choosing navigation routes.

"...But, but that's impossible!"

Even if Tsukiko herself had come to see Seina as a man, he was still a minor. Declaring her feelings was far too premature. More than that, for Tsukiko, who had unconsciously adapted to Earth's sense of age, the idea that she was seriously attracted to a boy over forty years her junior was too embarrassing to even speak of. Naturally, she intended to keep those feelings hidden within her heart until Seina reached a more appropriate age.

(Kuisu-sama~~!)

This whole situation felt exactly like having a love letter she never intended to send sent out without her permission.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!!”

Once again, Tsukiko buried her face in the cushion and writhed on the tatami mat, overcome with embarrassment. But then...

"Are you okay, Mom?" Kai's said from the veranda.

"Ka-Kai!!?”

"Stress? Or maybe you're just frustrated? If that's the case, why don't you just remarry Dad?"

"Hah! I'll get mad even if you're joking, Kai!"

"Anyway, I'm hungry. Is dinner ready yet?"

Kai yawned, shoved his hand into his shorts to scratch his butt, and added a loud fart for good measure. Tsukiko's blood boiled at his utter lack of tact.

"Here, buy yourself some sweet bread and eat that!"

Tsukiko slammed a 500-yen coin into Kai's hand and threw him out.

"That kid is just... ugh!!"

Glaring at Kai's retreating figure as he fled like a rabbit, Tsukiko suddenly noticed Sasami standing right beside her.

"S-Sasami-chan!?"

"He's still the same, isn't he, Kai-nii-chan?" Sasami, completely unfazed, smiled cheerfully as she set a large basket filled with vegetables and fruit on the veranda.

"These are leftovers from the souvenirs Ryo-chan got from Jurai."

"Oh, thank you. I appreciate your trouble." Tsukiko smoothed her disheveled clothes and hair, smiling at Sasami.

"Ryo-chan said Seina-nii-chan was doing well. Right, Ryo-chan?"

"...Myaa."

Startled by Tsukiko's stern expression, the Type B (Cabbit form) Ryo-Ohki hiding behind Sasami cautiously peeked out.

"Y-yes... thank you, Ryo-chan." Tsukiko smiled and stroked her head.

Finally reassured, the Ryo-Ohki perched neatly atop Sasami's head.

"You know, Auntie Tsukiko. Sasami is rooting for you, you know."

"...Huh!?" Tsukiko stared intently at Sasami's cheerful face.

"I want Kiriko-neechan to do her best too, but Auntie Tsukiko is perfect for him."

(She knows!? How??)

Tsukiko realized that Sasami, standing right in front of her, knew about what happened on Jurai.

"……Sasami-chan… how long have you been here?" Tsukiko asked timidly.

"Since Auntie Tsukiko was on the phone ♡" Sasami answered with a beaming smile.

The End

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This time, juggling this with a new project for my main job made it really hard to switch gears, and I struggled. It had been ages since I'd been stuck for months without writing a single line, and I got a bit anxious, but I managed to wrap it up somehow.

Even after writing seven GXP books, I still form the images in my head first, and I just can't shake the habit of trying to express them in words.

"A picture is worth a thousand words."

I always feel the weight of this saying. Well, sometimes writing is much easier, though...

Now, the next volume features Type B Fuku-chan, who only appeared briefly this time. The entire volume is packed with Fuku-chan's adorable exploits. Cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute cute! —— So, see you in the next volume.

Masaki Kajishima